

Lobbying for Israel in Twenty-First-Century America

HOPE AND DESPAIR: THE BUSH JR ERA, 2001–2009

As we've seen, the Clinton administration steered discussion of Israel and Palestine into dangerous waters – for AIPAC at least, if not for Israel itself. Its official recognition of Palestinian interests, even if it amounted to empty words, was not to AIPAC's taste. Even if its former staff were in charge, their liberalism now clashed with AIPAC's alignment with the right. But things were now set to change. The very beginning of the twenty-first century breathed new life into the work of the lobby, beginning with the second Intifada in 2000 – which effectively killed off the Oslo Accords for good. Even though the Intifada was triggered by the failure of the Camp David Summit, Clinton did not apportion any blame to Israeli intransigence, choosing to blame Arafat instead. But he himself was on his way out.

The 2000 presidential elections would be a landmark in AIPAC's history. For the first time, both presidential candidates addressed its annual convention. Al Gore needed AIPAC's financial and political support, and hence the outgoing Democratic administration headed up by Clinton was reluctant to put any pressure on Netanyahu or his successor Ehud Barak (in government from 1999 to 2001) to change their position. This yet again

illustrates how the lobbying infrastructure in the USA, as well as in Britain, became so embedded into political life that active exertion wasn't necessary. Gore and Clinton did not need to be reminded by AIPAC or any other unit in the elaborate lobbying infrastructure that their policy towards Israel could influence their success in the domestic elections.

Al Gore's and George Bush Jr's messages to the delegates seemed indistinguishable. Both speeches reiterated the commitment to a strong Israel; both condemned the trial of thirteen Jews in Iran who were tried as spies for Israel. They both backed a peace process and accordingly they both were greeted with the same loud applause. They differed on one issue: Bush promised to move the embassy to Jerusalem (although he got it wrong and promised 'only' to move the ambassador – this could have been interesting) and Gore did not mention the issue at all. As the US had chosen to respect the 1949 UN resolution regarding the international status of Jerusalem, the American embassy was based in Tel Aviv. Although Congress had backed moving the embassy to Jerusalem, the Clinton administration declared such a move counterproductive.¹

A more nuanced variation in the two speeches involved Bush's reference to Clinton's peace efforts hitherto. Bush indirectly scolded Clinton's identification with the so-called 'peace camp' in Israel when he promised not to interfere in Israeli domestic politics.² Bush, however, was still associated with his father's harsher attitude towards Israel and thus may have felt in 2000 that he was less favoured than Gore among that audience.

If that convention made observers believe that AIPAC was finally going along with the Clinton philosophy of supporting the 'peace camp' in Israel without changing Israel's actual policies, it all changed in the wake of a series of events at the end of 2000 and into 2001. In October 2000, the second Intifada burst out, triggered by an uninvited visit by Ariel Sharon, then the leader of the opposition, to Haram al-Sharif, the holy site of the Al-Aqsa Mosque. It was caused by frustration about the new map of disaster and oppression the Oslo Accords created on the ground. This dissected the West Bank into a large number of Palestinian enclaves connected by roads monitored by Israeli checkpoints, where Palestinians were abused daily and

coerced into serving as collaborators, and allowed Israel to encircle the Gaza Strip with barbed wire, turning it into a dense open prison. Peace was no longer on the agenda.

This was followed by the 9/11 attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. This period turned out to be more comfortable for AIPAC and the pro-Israel lobby at large. They now had a new president in the White House: George W. Bush Jr.

It seems that he was able to disassociate himself from his father among the American Jews who voted Republican. His message was appealing: 'My support for Israel is not conditional on the outcome of the peace process', or in other words he supported the Israeli rejection of the Palestinian demands.³ A few months into his term in office, the AIPAC mouthpiece the *Near East Report* noted that the 'Bush administration backed Israel's stance that political negotiations cannot resume amid the continuing violence, which was launched by the Palestinians'.⁴

After 9/11, the hawks were back in charge of AIPAC, and they were quick to reassert their authority. The lobby began commodifying a narrative that linked terrorism with Islam and Palestine. Unconditional support for Israel was now a pillar of the new 'war on terror'. The question was: how would the new Republican administration deal with the situation in Palestine and what would be its basic attitude towards Israel?

FORSAKING PALESTINE YET AGAIN

Bush's main desire was to distance himself from the Israel/Palestine issue as far as he could, but the circumstances did not always allow it. His reservations about taking any kind of strong stand are indicated by his refusal to renew the position of a special envoy to the Middle East (the last one was Dennis Ross). But developments on the ground ruled out such an aloof approach. Daniel Zoughbie's title for his book, describing the endless

haphazard changes in Bush's policy every time he had to respond to a new challenge in the real world, was apt: *Indecision Points*.⁵

AIPAC was not the only body closely watching the new president; other actors on the scene revealed themselves when the president decided to appoint Daniel C. Kurtzer as an ambassador to Israel. The Christian Zionists, together with Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, objected to the appointment. A hawkish group called Americans for a Safe Israel, founded in 1970, called upon the president to find 'a Bible-believing Christian' instead of Kurtzer, who was an Orthodox Jew. In their eyes, this appointment probably implied too much distance from their idiosyncratic reading of the Bible as a book that adjures Israel to annex the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As their website states:

AFSI was founded in 1970 as an American counterpart to the Land of Israel Movement, asserting Israel's historic, religious, and legal rights to the land re-claimed in the 1967 War.⁶

They had their own candidate, Edward E. McAteer, founder of another Christian Zionist outfit, Religious Roundtable, and close friend of the televangelist Jerry Falwell, who told the press he was interested in the job. As for Klein, he described Kurtzer as someone who 'praised Arafat and the PLO as moderates' and hence unsuitable for the job. However, this campaign failed since AIPAC did not join it, and thus Kurtzer's appointment was approved.⁷

After 9/11, Bush found himself facing an Arab world that demanded a reward for collaborating with the American 'war on terror'. Another challenge was the intensification of violence on the ground in 2002, when a suicide bomber entered a hotel in Netanya during a Passover seder, killing thirty civilians and injuring 140. This led to Operation Defensive Shield, in which Israel practically reoccupied the whole of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, using tanks and aircraft in the process, culminating in the massacre of many in the Jenin refugee camp in April 2002. These developments prompted the Bush administration to take a deeper interest in de-escalating the conflict in this area at least. In the background was a clear

Saudi initiative in 2002, supported by the Arab League, offering recognition of Israel in return for a genuine two-state solution.

The Bush administration sent several envoys, who here and there obtained short ceasefires, meetings between the sides and plans for more diplomacy in the future, but in reality changed little.

AIPAC was called into action when President Bush sharply urged Israel to withdraw immediately from the newly occupied spaces run by the Palestinian Authority. 'Do it without delay', he exhorted the Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon.⁸ The response was a huge demonstration organised by the lobby in Washington on 5 May 2002, demanding that the president stop pressuring Israel, a message also passed on by leading neo-conservatives and Christian Zionists (two important constituencies of the president's electoral power). Bush changed the tone of his next public references to the situation in Palestine. The lobby also recruited the majority leader of the House, Tom DeLay, to organise a similar appeal from Republican members.⁹ The overall message was clear: give Israel a free hand to quell the second Intifada.

By June 2002, Bush and Sharon were on the same wavelength. The president implored the Palestinians to elect a new leadership, a call well received by AIPAC and Israel. But unexpectedly, Arafat and the neighbouring Arab countries snatched this opportunity, which was followed by an American commitment to a 'road map' that would lead to a Palestinian state. Arafat appointed a prime minister to run the affairs of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas. The Arab world backed these moves and responded positively to the idea that a step-by-step 'road map' would lead eventually to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. But at the same time the harsh Israeli oppression continued, as did the Palestinian guerrilla attacks against civilians inside Israel, and there was no move towards such a 'road map'. In September 2003, Mahmoud Abbas resigned, and America was engaged in a new imperialist adventure: the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq.

THE CHRISTIAN AND JEWISH CHEERLEADERS FOR THE IRAQ WAR

John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt allege that AIPAC's involvement in building consensus in the US administration for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was both central and indisputable.¹⁰ This is true, but there was another group, nascent in the Reagan, Bush Sr and Clinton administrations, pushing for war with Iraq: the neo-conservatives. Eventually, Israeli politicians, AIPAC and the neo-conservatives worked in tandem and formed a powerful pressure group in favour of invading Iraq.

Let us begin with the Israeli impact. At first, as Mearsheimer and Walt point out, Israel under Ariel Sharon was sceptical about such an invasion and preferred to see American action against Iran, but he was persuaded that Iraq was only the first step and Israel lent its support to those in the administration who advocated such an action.¹¹

As early as August 2002, Sharon told the Knesset's foreign affairs and defence committee that Iraq was 'the greatest danger facing Israel'. In the same month he warned the Bush administration that postponing the attack would allow Saddam to accelerate his weapons programme.¹²

From that moment onward, Israel's top propagandist, Benjamin Netanyahu, was enlisted in the campaign to persuade people in America of the validity of the invasion. 'The urgent need to topple Saddam is paramount', he told the American Senate in 2002, adding that such a campaign 'deserves the unconditional support of all sane governments'.¹³ Later he wrote op-eds for the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, entitled 'The Case for Toppling Saddam', and stated: 'nothing less than dismantling his regime will do.'¹⁴

Another recruit was Shimon Peres, Israel's foreign minister, who told CNN: 'Saddam Hussein is as dangerous as Bin Laden' and therefore the USA 'cannot sit and wait'.¹⁵ Last but not least, Ehud Barak, the former Israeli prime minister, suggested in an op-ed in the *Washington Post* that the Bush administration 'should, first of all, focus on Iraq and the removal of Saddam Hussein'.¹⁶

AIPAC amplified these efforts by the Israeli state and boasted about their role. Howard Kohr, the CEO of AIPAC, told the *New York Sun* in January 2003 that one of AIPAC's greatest successes was in lobbying Congress to approve the initiation of a war. And indirectly, the publisher of *US News & World Report*, Mortimer Zuckerman, chair at the time of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, used his magazine to call for a war. Jewish leaders of official outfits such as the American Jewish Committee and Reform bodies were all putting pressure on the administration to invade. The sentiment was summarised succinctly by Gary Rosenblatt, editor of the *Jewish Week*:

Washington's imminent war on Saddam Hussein is ... an opportunity to rid the world of a dangerous tyrant who presents a particularly horrific threat to Israel.

He went on to say: 'the Torah instructs that when your enemy seeks to kill you, kill him first.'¹⁷

AIPAC began lobbying for the war from the end of December 2001 until the use of force was approved by Congress in 2002 and the war commenced. It published a *Briefing Book* for its membership and congressional offices, presenting information and analyses. It contained the following statement:

As long as Saddam Hussein is in power, any containment of Iraq will only be temporary until the next crisis or act of aggression.¹⁸

Its newsletter, the *Near East Report*, had in its 'editor's comments' on 7 October 2002 a totally unfounded analysis of Saddam Hussein's involvement in the 9/11 attacks. At times it was hinted by AIPAC that Yasser Arafat was part of the conspiracy. Years later the 9/11 commission report stated clearly:

to date we have seen no evidence that these or the earlier contacts ever developed into a collaborative operational relationship. Nor have we seen evidence indicating that Iraq cooperated with al Qaeda in developing or carrying out any attacks against the United States.¹⁹

There were other strong indicators of how AIPAC influenced American policy on Iraq. On the eve of the war, after the USA failed to get UN approval, Rep. James Moran (Democrat, Virginia) told a meeting of his constituents that:

If it were not for the strong support of the Jewish community for this war with Iraq, we would not be doing this.²⁰

Leaders of the organised Jewish community of greater Washington, along with several of Moran's fellow congressional Democrats, seized upon these remarks and forced the representative to issue a rather pathetic retraction.²¹ Though this incident had no practical policy implications, the brief media furore that followed Moran's comment exposed the ambiguity in the pro-Israel lobby when it came to assessing its own role in pushing America towards a war in Iraq. They could not deny that it was in Israel's interest – which they represented in the USA – to persuade the USA to go to war. On the other hand, the moment the war became less popular, they didn't want to look like they had anything to do with it. The best way forward was to accuse congressmen such as Moran of anti-Semitism and hope it would distract everyone from looking too closely at the issue. Moran's swift apology demonstrated how much Congress representatives felt the need to toe the line – allowing the lobby to manage its own image in the eyes of the public.

AIPAC's impact on the decision to go to war should also be viewed in light of its connections with American neo-conservatism. Even before the invasion, a group of neo-conservatives, strongly linked to Israel's Likud Party, became influential in shaping George W. Bush's Middle East policy. We should remember that AIPAC did not represent American Jews as such, but only a small portion of them, and secondly, among the people who influenced Bush's policy in the Middle East and pushed for the war, there was a large number of non-Jews, most prominently Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. The link between the most hawkish elements of the pro-Israel lobby and the second Bush administration was based on a convergence of interests and ideology.

The neo-cons did not need any prompting from AIPAC; they had been pushing for a war since the early 1990s. They pursued the invasion more zealously after 2001 and tried to substantiate their advocacy for war on a professional basis through research in many think-tanks and institutions. Like amoebas, these outfits transmuted or reappeared as new bodies. After the 9/11 attacks, the same personalities could be found on the Defense Policy Board, which emerged as an advocacy group calling upon the White House to remove Saddam Hussein by force. They carried out their own erroneous research that linked Saddam Hussein with Al-Qaeda. They even claimed there had been a meeting between Iraqi intelligence and the hijackers in Prague prior to 9/11. The Czech intelligence services have adamantly denied that such a meeting ever took place.²²

This all led to the infamous open letter written by the Board to President Bush on 20 September 2001 that stated:

Even if evidence does not link Iraq directly to the [September 11] attack, any strategy aiming at the eradication of terrorism and its sponsors must include a determined effort to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq ... Failure to undertake such an effort will constitute an early and perhaps decisive surrender in the war on international terrorism.²³

The neo-con movement was far more ambitious than AIPAC and its expectations of the American administration and visions of the future were not confined to Israel – they were dreaming of changing the entire Middle East region, remaking it in their image. Their ideal scenario was a region transformed by force and coerced into being subordinate to the West, or at least domesticated by the West (within this imagined political cartography one can find a Greater Israel, stretching over the whole of historical Palestine). The neo-cons rejected the Oslo Accords, as well as the idea of a Palestinian state. The links now among opposing Palestinian statehood, supporting apartheid Greater Israel and endorsing an aggressive policy in the region as a whole up to and including the invasion of Iraq ought to have prompted more serious criticism from within the American establishment. So why did no dissident tendency emerge?

The graduates of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy – Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, his deputy Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle –

got Colin Powell onside and pushed for a military attack on Iraq. At the same time, another, more consensual assault on Al-Qaeda was contemplated in Afghanistan. Each one of these figures would participate in the annual AIPAC conference. And each time they spoke, they reaffirmed unconditional support for Israel's policy vis-à-vis Palestine and the Palestinians.

Since these prime movers of the neo-con lobby for war and Israel's annexationist policies were partly employed in outfits associated with AIPAC, we can see how a coalition of sorts became a powerful voice eventually persuading the White House to occupy Iraq in 2003. This was a pseudo-academic coalition that advised the Bush administration on the basis of 'research' to forgo any meaningful attempt to facilitate a peace process and adopt an aggressive policy in the Arab world. In tandem with AIPAC, this group presented the invasion of Iraq first and foremost as an action to defend Israel against weapons of mass destruction allegedly developed by Saddam Hussein, rather than retribution for 9/11.²⁴ The lack of evidence for such weapons did not trouble their consciences too much.

Dick Cheney, who was part of the entourage supporting the war in Iraq, was also a moving spirit behind a group that supported similar action against Iran. This was a body he created called Freedom's Watch, which worked in conjunction with the Jewish Republic Coalition, formerly known as the National Jewish Coalition that was founded already in 1985. Its other close partner was the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, a veteran neo-con institution. Freedom's Watch, according to the *New York Times*, tried to convene a private pressure group that would urge the administration to wage war against Iran.

Years later, when the British Parliament demanded explanation from its former prime minister, Tony Blair, for his ill-fated decision to join the war, he told an inquiry commission about a meeting he had with Bush in Crawford, Texas, in April 2002, where Israeli officials were present and the Israeli connection to a prospective action against Iraq was discussed. He recalled that 'the Israel issue was big at the time'.²⁵

It took only a year for the world to realise that the invasion of Iraq wasn't all it was cracked up to be, and that bragging about the lobby's role was inadvisable, to say the least. But the work of the lobby, in its neo-con, Christian Zionist and Jewish stripes, set a precedent for how administrations related to the lobby for the next decade.

Despite the seemingly universal consensus about the invasion that AIPAC sought to portray, the reality is that the American Jewish community at large did not support the war. Sadly, as Jewish community bodies had been co-opted to such an extent by the Israeli state, they no longer had a vehicle to express their opposition.

The Israeli government, neo-cons and Christian Zionists, all of whom AIPAC closely collaborated with, helped make the invasion of Iraq possible and must be held responsible for the catastrophes that followed: civil war, state collapse, the rise of the Islamic State and the ongoing refugee crisis. AIPAC and Israel encouraged the American propensity for bellicose Middle Eastern policies. But as soon as the war erupted, AIPAC had to navigate carefully between its enthusiasm and the growing opposition to the war once the first coffins of American soldiers arrived from both Iraq and Afghanistan. This difficulty of this navigation was clearly displayed at AIPAC's 2003 convention.

WAR ON IRAQ IS GOOD FOR ISRAEL

There were two interlinked issues that troubled the organisers of the 2003 annual conference of AIPAC: firstly, the administration's support for the 'road map' that would lead to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and secondly, the question of how to downplay AIPAC's enthusiasm for the war at a time when it could well become as unpopular as the Vietnam War in the 1960s.

AIPAC's leadership suspected that their guest of honour, President George Bush Jr, would repeat his support for a 'road map' as an attempt to appease the pro-American camp in the Arab world. Just before its 2003

convention, AIPAC, even more than the Israeli government, reacted nervously to Bush's attempt to build an international coalition in Iraq by promising a 'road map' after a Palestinian prime minister 'with real authority' had taken office. This was a convenient ploy by Israel's government to make progress conditional on something that was always subjective – and hence always up for debate – in this case demanding a prime minister with 'real authority' in a territory he could have no real authority over.²⁶ American policy makers followed suit and obfuscated any promise of a vision for justice for Palestinians to the point that the gestures were meaningless. This was illustrated by a string of contradictory statements that voided each other. Thus, in March 2003 the State Department spokesman, Richard Boucher, said that the 'road map' was non-negotiable, while other State Department and National Security Council officials explained immediately after this that everything was open for further discussion.²⁷

But AIPAC's worries were dispelled when they realised that the adventure in Iraq delayed any clear American policy on the 'road map'. On the eve of the convention, AIPAC leaders informed the media that they had been heartened by the White House's reluctance to embrace the 'road map' during the Iraq crisis and its willingness to delay its implementation at Israel's request.²⁸

But AIPAC wasn't happy to rest on its laurels; it couldn't risk someone genuinely committed to the peace process whispering in the president's ear. It took the precautionary step of calling repeatedly for congressional legislation that would codify the condition that Bush stipulated in his 24 June 2002 speech, in which he called for an interim Palestinian state, but only after a complete cessation of violence against Israel and the replacement of the Palestinian Authority leadership, as legally binding.²⁹ AIPAC convinced lawmakers in the House but not in the Senate to offer such legislation and place it inside bills related to funding offered to the Palestinian Authority and other Palestinian organisations. The theory was that legislation that held Bush to the parameters of his June speech could offset the influence of the 'road map'. In the words of AIPAC's president,

Amy Friedkin: ‘We will be lobbying for support for the road map that implements the president’s June 24th vision.’³⁰ This was a redundant exertion on AIPAC’s part; it was simply an assertion of their own power. American aid did flow into the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and this was a part of American policy that AIPAC was unable to stop; however, suggestions about moving Israel onto the ‘road map’ leading to a two-state solution were only hollow words, and everyone knew it.

In any case, the Iraq War put any talk of a ‘road map’ out of sight and out of mind. ‘I don’t think there will be that much talk about the road map,’ said Morris Amitay, former executive director of AIPAC, to the Jewish press on the eve of the 2003 conference, ‘unless the war is over by then, everything will be focused on the war.’³¹ The war did not end with the deposition of Saddam Hussein. Iraq still feels the repercussions now.

The invasion also meant that the 2003 conference was a muted affair. There was a widespread belief that Israel, via AIPAC, had played a crucial role in the decision to invade Iraq without a mandate from the UN – and AIPAC didn’t want to make that connection any stronger.

‘I believe that we don’t have to choose between being pro-Israel and being a patriotic American’, Amy Friedkin told the Jewish press.³² But nonetheless the US held back from stating Israel’s role openly, and it shied away from proclaiming its work in protecting Israel from attacks in Baghdad. The *Jewish Telegraph* summarised the dilemma in the following way:

In a perfect world, AIPAC would highlight the role Israel has played in US efforts against Iraq, and the job the United States has done to protect Israel from possible attacks from Baghdad. In the real world, however, the United States has tried to downplay Israel’s role – even keeping it off the list of countries in its ‘coalition of the willing’ – to prevent a potential backlash from the Arab world.³³

In reality, Israel was part of the ‘coalition of the willing’, the forty-nine nation states that the administration identified as supporting the Anglo-American assault on Iraq. When AIPAC met for its 2003 convention, it was reluctant to declare an official position on the situation in Iraq, to avoid intensifying the aspersions already being cast. But AIPAC’s website was

happy to boast about ‘Israeli weapons utilised by Coalition forces against Iraq’, referring to the Israeli Hunter and Pioneer drones and Popeye air-to-surface missiles used in Iraq.³⁴

Although the war was controversial in American civil society – sparking some of the biggest protests the country had ever seen – the pro-Israel lobby practically unanimously supported the invasion. Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, said: ‘There was no need for Jews to get ahead of the curve’ on Iraq by speaking out before the White House decided whether to go to war, and added ‘but now that the United States has invaded Iraq, it is appropriate for the Jewish world to support it’.³⁵

Amy Friedkin echoed the consensus of the lobby, conscious of the advantages of Middle East issues now making the daily headlines: ‘We are very aware that we are at war’, Friedkin told the *Washington Post*, and ‘while we are celebrating the relationship of the United States and Israel, we need to support American troops and support the efforts for democracy to be built in the Middle East.’³⁶

Accordingly, AIPAC’s 2003 conference was the one place Colin Powell, now notorious for presenting the falsified report about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction, could find a warm reception. Powell was personally addressed by Silvan Shalom, Israel’s foreign minister at the time, who attended the conference. Shalom praised Powell for the attack on Iraq.³⁷ In his speech, Shalom imbued America’s invasion with significance that even Powell might have struggled to agree with:

Even as we speak, allied forces are engaged in combat in Iraq. While Operation Iraqi Freedom is advancing, it is not a simple undertaking and involves high risks. The tyranny of Iraqi rulers today has its roots in ancient Babylon of biblical times. The prophet Jeremiah referred to the dangers posed by Babylon, Iraq of today, to the region, and to God’s punishment for the cruel despots of the land of two rivers. Some would say Jeremiah prophesied current events. He said, and I quote, ‘I will raise against Babylon an assembly of great nations from the north country, for she has sinned against God.’

Tonight, I would like to offer our prayers for the safety of the heroic men and women of the coalition forces. Your courage and bravery are for a great and historic cause. Success in Iraq will pave the way for new hope in the Middle East, for new hope for Israel, for new hope for the rest of the world.

Freedom, democracy, and human rights should no longer be foreign terms for the people of the region. Believe me, nothing will make us happier than knowing that Israel is no longer the sole democracy in the Middle East.³⁸

Although Israeli guests could be unabashed in their support for the war, AIPAC's leadership had to walk a tightrope – given that anything from a third to a half of the US public had reservations about the war. 'The war inhibits your desire to want to trumpet the relationship at a time when the United States and Israel are downplaying it', said Doug Bloomfield, former legislative director for AIPAC. But conference attendees 'can highlight common values and common issues', he added, in an attempt to justify the huge enthusiasm on the floor for the invasion.³⁹

The invasion wasn't AIPAC's only image problem in 2003. Its bipartisanship was seen by many as a façade for its complete commitment to the Republicans. Any dissent from the floor from Republican consensus was swiftly shut down by lobby officials. When Leon S. Fuerth, the former national adviser to Al Gore, expressed his misgivings about the utility of imposing democracy by force on a foreign country, he was scolded by the moderator, AIPAC's Steve Rosen, who declared: 'God willing, we're going to have a great victory in Iraq', and was cheered loudly by the attendees.⁴⁰

Conscious of these tensions, Israel also advised AIPAC to tone down their embrace of the war in public debate in the US. 'We do not need to shout', advised Eyal Arad, who used to be Ariel Sharon's campaign's adviser, realising that the Bush administration did not wish to expose Israel's role in the discussions and preparations for the assault.⁴¹ But in Israel itself, there was no need for moderation.

American taxpayers might have seen the war as a dubious use of their dollars, but AIPAC saw it as a time to raid the federal piggy bank. It was decided to use the 2003 conference to encourage Congress to approve the White House's proposal for \$1 billion of military aid and \$9 billion in loan guarantees for Israel. The argument was that it was a small percentage of the overall anticipated \$100 billion expenditure for the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns.⁴²

By that time such congressional support was obtained by a well-oiled advocacy machine whose actions were aptly depicted in Mor Loushy's documentary, *Kings of Capitol Hill*. In the film, you can see on Capitol Hill side rooms rented informally by AIPAC in which members of both Houses were introduced to potential donors for future electoral campaigns (donors who represented groups and firms that had nothing to do with Israel), while, at the same time, the guests were briefed by AIPAC on the positions they should hold vis-à-vis American policy towards Israel and the Middle East.⁴³

Extra aid to Israel could have gone down badly in the midst of war, tax cuts and a deficit, but the pro-Israel lobby knew the wheels of the perpetual motion machine they had spent decades building were still turning, and it would ensure that there would be bipartisan support from congressional leaders on military aid to Israel, even at that difficult moment in American fiscal history. It did not always get what it was asking for. When it sought \$4 billion in military aid, it had to be content with only a quarter of that amount. AIPAC president Amy Friedkin told the Jewish press that AIPAC would lobby for whatever package the Bush administration and Israel would agree to.⁴⁴

After the conference, and throughout 2004 up to the November elections, AIPAC still had one reservation: the Bush administration was still making public endorsements of the two-state solution and declaring its adherence to the basic guidelines adopted by other members of the Quartet to which America belonged: Russia, the UN and the EU. The Middle East Quartet, as it is known, was established in 2001 in the wake of the second Intifada and as part of the international effort to secure a ceasefire. A year later in Madrid it was officially declared as an initiative to bring about the two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and it located its headquarters in East Jerusalem.

AIPAC's objection to this solution was voiced in the wake of an unusual lament by Bush about the undue force used by Israel against the Palestinians. AIPAC, together with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, and supported by Christian Zionist organisations, made sure Bush was brought back to toe the line expected of

him. These organisations initiated a number of mass demonstrations, and invited Benjamin Netanyahu as a key speaker at them, to demand that Palestinian actions against the ongoing occupation would be seen as pure terrorism. A similar message was sent from Sharon to Bush. In the words of Tom Friedman from the *New York Times*, while Sharon had Arafat under house arrest in Ramallah, 'he's had George Bush under house arrest in the Oval Office'.⁴⁵ Bush was quick to adopt AIPAC's preferred descriptors for Palestinian resistance once again.

But by the 2004 elections, they didn't need to worry, as neither candidate troubled themselves with the fate of the Palestinians. Both candidates, George Bush and John Kerry, depicted the Palestinian liberation struggle and its guerrilla warfare as terrorist activity, equating it with Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and with Saddam Hussein in Iraq. This was a very shaky argument. As evidence, both candidates resurrected the 1985 killing of Leon Klinghoffer by Palestinians, who had hijacked the cruise ship he was on, and the more recent beheading of the American journalist Daniel Pearl in Afghanistan in 2002. The fact that Daniel Pearl was murdered by Pakistani fundamentalists, not Palestinian guerrillas, seemed not to register. Bush had another noticeable blind spot: namely, over three thousand Palestinian deaths at the hands of the Israeli army since the turn of the millennium.

George Bush returned to AIPAC for the first time as a sitting president for their 2004 annual convention. His forty-eight-minute speech was interrupted by twenty-four standing ovations. It was mostly about his alleged success in Iraq and how much Israel benefited from American aggression there.⁴⁶

Bush's words need no interpretation:

AIPAC is doing important work. I hope you know it. In Washington and beyond, AIPAC is calling attention to the great security challenges of our time. You're educating Congress and the American people on the growing dangers of proliferation.⁴⁷

Moreover, flush from celebrating 'victory' in Iraq, Bush compared Jerusalem to Baghdad as two cities that needed to be liberated from

terrorism and from ‘the enemies of freedom’, and for that he received a standing ovation. His remarks were even more welcome when he once more reiterated the possible connection between Palestinian ‘terrorism’ and the new ‘war on terror’.

When Bush declared: ‘for the sake of peace and security, we ended the regime of Saddam Hussein’, the applause reached a crescendo, and it rose to an even higher volume when he finally found a way to connect Saddam to ‘terrorism against Israel’ by informing the audience that ‘the [Iraqi] regime sponsored terror; it paid rewards of up to \$25,000 to the families of Palestinian suicide bombers’.⁴⁸

But the audience noticeably cooled when the president reiterated the US’s commitment to establishing a democratic and viable Palestinian state, although to reassure them, he quickly added the qualifier that for that to happen the Palestinians needed to renounce terrorism first and get rid of their corrupt leadership.

From 2002 until the end of Bush’s term in office, American political and public engagement with Israel and Palestine moved along three different tracks. The first was official negotiations with the Israeli government. For most of the time the dealings were with Ariel Sharon as prime minister, until he suffered a severe stroke in 2006 and was replaced by Ehud Olmert.

All in all, Israeli policy, in particular from the moment Sharon decided to disengage from the Gaza Strip in 2004 (namely pulling all the Jewish settlers out of there and leaving the Palestinians to take over), was quite well co-ordinated with American–Israeli actions at a governmental level.

AIPAC was ambivalent towards Sharon’s policies and in particular the disengagement from Gaza. Most of its members sided with the opposition to the disengagement, but the organisation hesitated to oppose an Israeli government and an American administration that fully supported its policies.

What mattered more to AIPAC was its own role in the new political set-up in Israel. And its main efforts were less aimed at changing Israeli policies or persuading Bush not to support them, and much more focused on maintaining its vital role in shaping the American–Israeli relationship.

This is why it did not attack the government of Israel at its annual conference in 2005. At the conference, AIPAC found an effective way to show its continued vitality and usefulness. It stated its role as ensuring that Congress would find a way of compensating Israel for the ‘concession’ it made in Gaza, thus continuing to build on the foundations that AIPAC and its predecessor, AZEC, had established since the mid-term elections in 1944.

The second track was AIPAC’s attempt to control the narrative on Palestine in American civil society and to arrest the avalanche of solidarity with the Palestinians, which accelerated when activists depicted Israel as a pariah state and demanded that the administration act accordingly. For the first time, large sections of the African American and Native American communities were recruited to the global solidarity network with Palestine. The third track was the lobby’s appeal to Christian Zionist and neo-conservative groups to increase their influence on American foreign policy. This Judeo-Christian Zionist lobby was fighting with all its might the shift towards supporting the Palestinians that had intensified among Democrats and progressive sections of the American Jewish community.

AIPAC JOINS THE ROAD MAP TO NOWHERE, 2004–2005

In March 2004, the Israeli prime minister had just announced the ‘Gaza disengagement’ plan – meaning the Jewish settlers departed and anyone could step in to fill the power vacuum. What Israel didn’t plan on was Hamas winning the elections for the legislative assembly created by the Oslo Accords in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 2006. It could justifiably claim to be the new authority in the Gaza Strip. It was powerful enough to repel a Palestine Authority attempt, backed by Israel and the USA, to topple it. These elections hence heralded a bloody and disturbing chapter in an internal Palestinian conflict that separated the West Bank from the Gaza Strip, while the latter became a military battlefield between Israel and Hamas (aided by organisations such as Islamic Jihad).

This development wasn't as much of a blow to Sharon's strategy as we might expect. Disengagement meant he was free to punish the Strip without worrying about incurring collateral damage to Jewish settlers. Nor was he deterred by a developing clash within Israeli Jewish society bringing the state to the brink of civil war in the eyes of many, due to widespread and violent demonstrations by the right in Israel against disengagement. Sharon claimed that disengagement – entirely implemented on his initiative and not from any impetus from Palestinians – was a national trauma that could never be repeated again; in other words, Israel would never disengage from the West Bank. He was not the first to resort to such gaslighting, presenting himself as a man of peace willing to concede territory, while in essence he tightened Israel's grip on Gaza from the outside and excluded totally the West Bank from any future negotiations. Menachem Begin had sacrificed the Israeli settlements in the Sinai Peninsula for the sake of the Greater Israel, and now Sharon had sacrificed the Gaza Strip for the consensual version of the Greater Israel, incorporating the West Bank.

On 14 April 2004, President Bush wrote a long letter to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon praising his decision to disengage from the Gaza Strip.⁴⁹ He also approved of the construction of the separation barrier within the West Bank and between the West Bank and Israel (one which was categorially condemned worldwide and partly declared illegal by the International Court of Justice). Bush wrote as if there were a promise that this wall would be temporary, pending a peace agreement. All boded well towards the beginning of 2005, although AIPAC still did not regard Sharon as the ideal leader for Israel and waited impatiently for Likud to return to power.

The close ties between AIPAC and Likud could have made it a powerful voice in America against disengagement from Gaza. But as noted, the lobby cared about its power much more than about developments on the ground. And as long as Sharon and Bush recognised its power, they were welcome at AIPAC's biggest ever annual convention in 2005. Although his popularity with the lobby had waned, the Israeli prime minister remained AIPAC's guest of honour at its key event. It was a mutually beneficial set-up – AIPAC got the prestige of Sharon's presence, and Sharon obtained AIPAC's

official approval of the disengagement plan, despite its unpopularity among other members of the pro-Israel lobby. Disapproval of the plan mainly came from Morton Klein, the president of the Zionist Organization of America, once a force to reckon with, but with greatly diminished power in the twenty-first century.⁵⁰ For the first time in its history, AIPAC was congratulated by organisations traditionally opposed to it within the American Jewish community, such as Americans for Peace Now, the sister organisation of Peace Now in Israel.

It was clear that when Sharon was about to talk to the 2005 conference, he would face some opposition from the floor, but not from AIPAC's leadership.

AIPAC'S BEST YEAR YET: 2005

The Walter E. Washington Convention Center, in Mount Vernon Square in Washington DC, was only two years old when AIPAC met there for its 2005 annual conference. The centre is a 210,000 square-metre complex and is run by Events DC, the entertainment authority for the District of Columbia. The firm Thompson, Ventulett, Stainback and Associates commissioned the centre from the architects Devroux and Purnell. They specialised in 'superblocks' – gigantic edifices that were a spectacle in themselves – and this was one of their largest ever projects.

On 23 May 2005, you would have found it difficult to reach the convention centre. Police cars blocked every intersection leading to it. Entry was limited to those escorted by motorcade or a designated bus.

The five thousand fortunate attendees enjoyed endless quantities of food and the company of the top politicians in the country. Twenty-six thousand kosher meals, 32,640 hors d'oeuvres, 2,500 pounds of salmon, 1,200 pounds of turkey, 900 pounds of chicken, 700 pounds of beef and 125 gallons of hummus were there to feed everyone for the three days of meetings – as AIPAC boasted in its press releases.⁵¹ It also crowed that

AIPAC was at that time one of the four top lobby groups in America with a membership of over 100,000.

The distinguished guest list was also heralded as a huge success. The Israeli guests of honour were headed by Ariel Sharon. He told the conference that his disengagement plan would strengthen Israel's security and expressed his confidence in the US president's 'road map'. Some attendees loudly heckled his speech – they were forcibly ejected from the conference hall by security personnel.

A source who refused to be named told the *Jewish Journal*: 'the real story is that they [AIPAC] were forced to make a statement supporting it [the disengagement] as part of the price of getting Sharon to speak to them [at the conference]'. The journalist attracted his readers' attention to the fact that 'the mood in the hall was sceptical – this was evident every time a speaker mentioned it [the disengagement] – but they had no choice.'⁵²

Another journalist covering the event concurred with this description and reported that anyone praising Sharon from the rostrum got limited applause. Many delegates wore orange buttons, an Israeli symbol indicating support for the Gaza settlers. When Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice lauded Sharon's policy of withdrawal, she received faint applause.⁵³

As for the other American politicians, readers can get a sense of how they were received from the following quotation from the *Jewish Journal*:

During AIPAC's famous 'roll call' congressional guests were greeted with ovations ranging from the tepid to the tumultuous (Sen. Lincoln Chaffe, R-RI, widely seen as cool towards Israel, produced barely a ripple: Sen. Max Liberman, D-Con, almost brought the house down).⁵⁴

The conference was attended by a larger number of members of Congress than any other event, except for joint sessions of Congress and the State of the Union address. Had it been an election year, the sitting president would quite probably have headed the group of VIPs.

For the first time in AIPAC's history, only the US national anthem was played at the conference, while *Hatikvah*, Israel's national anthem, was dropped. That led attendees at the 2005 conference to speculate that the decision to drop Israel's national anthem was an attempt by the group to

show its loyalty to the US government, given the growing doubt about this among some sections of American society.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (Republican, Tennessee), Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (Democrat, Nevada), Speaker Dennis Hastert (Republican, Illinois) and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (Democrat, California) took to the podium to pledge their continued support for Israel.⁵⁵

Condoleezza Rice was the first speaker in the morning, and she was followed by congressional leaders, debating American foreign policy. Those taking part in the debate, Rep. Jane Harman (Democrat, California) and the administration's informal foreign policy adviser Richard Perle, engaged in a neck-and-neck battle to persuade their audience that they were more pro-Israel than their interlocutors.

For instance, Harman tried to curry favour with her audience, most of whom were Republicans, by reminding them that she had an aide who once worked for AIPAC and schmoozed the audience by commending them for being 'very sophisticated'. To top it all, she joined the crowd in celebrating Yasser Arafat's death as 'a blessing'.⁵⁶ But after half an hour of this, Harman could not keep up. Perle provoked cheers from the crowd when he favoured a military raid on Iran, saying that 'if Iran is on the verge of a nuclear weapon, I think we will have no choice but to take decisive action.' When Harman said the 'best short-term option' for dealing with Iran was the UN Security Council, the crowd reacted with boos.

Words were accompanied by histrionics. AIPAC's multimedia show, 'Iran's Path to the Bomb', was displayed in the convention centre's basement.⁵⁷ The exhibit, worthy of a theme park, began with a narrator condemning the International Atomic Energy Agency for being 'unwilling to conclude that Iran is developing nuclear weapons' (it had similar reservations about Iraq) and the Security Council because it 'has yet to take up the issue'.⁵⁸

In a succession of rooms, visitors saw flashing lights and heard rumbling sounds. Next to them were contraptions that were meant to be yellowcake uranium pieces alongside a presentation of a plutonium

reprocessing plant. As one observer put it, there were as many nuclear warheads around as there were gallons of hummus.⁵⁹

And yet this penchant for spectacle could not hide the fact that this was an ambiguous moment in the history of the lobby. A year before, AIPAC had dismissed its policy director and another employee, in reaction to the FBI probing the possibility that they had passed classified US information to Israel. Larry Franklin, a former senior analyst on the Pentagon's Iran desk, could have received a prison sentence of nearly thirteen years for passing top-secret information to Steve Rosen and Keith Weissman, who worked for AIPAC at the time.⁶⁰ These two AIPAC officials were charged under the Espionage Act. In 2009, however, US Justice Department prosecutors overruled the FBI's advice to take the pair to trial and instead dropped the case.

This was more than just a momentary embarrassment. Although AIPAC had successfully navigated its way out of the dangerous waters of the Pollard affair, it once more had to convince the American public that it was not simply an arm of Israeli diplomacy.

The annual conference avoided mentioning these rather inconvenient matters; most of the delegates probably did not feel any sense of panic. Again, as Dana Milbank observed, none of these issues kept the powerful 'from lining up to woo AIPAC'.⁶¹ In the conference, in fact, other bodies appeared to show solidarity with AIPAC. Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League said that they were there because 'there is a cloud over AIPAC' and so 'it is important for leaders of the American Jewish Community to be here and show support.'⁶² Another delegate dismissed altogether the FBI probe into the affairs of AIPAC and told journalists the delegates were only focused on Iran.

On the face of it, it looked like a moment when AIPAC had reached a pinnacle of success. Since 1949, the US had passed to Israel more than \$100 billion in grants and \$10 billion in special loans. According to the estimate suggested by Mearsheimer and Walt, by 2005 total American aid to Israel was \$154 billion and was worth more when accounting for the favourable conditions attached to loans.⁶³

Other bodies that were not part of the administration annually transferred \$1 billion to Israel. As Naseer Aruri notes, this is larger than the amount of money transferred by the US to North Africa, South America and the Caribbean put together. Their joint population amounts to over one billion people; Israel's population barely reached nine million in 2007. Over the last forty years, roughly \$8.5 billion had been given to Israel for military purchases.⁶⁴

Despite this, AIPAC continued to target politicians whom it deemed potentially anti-Israel. In 2002, the pro-Israel lobby successfully targeted African American representatives Earl Hilliard (Democrat, Alabama) and Cynthia McKinney (Democrat, Georgia), leading to their defeat in the Democratic primaries.

Hilliard was the Alabama congressional Democratic run-off candidate in 2002. He ran successfully in the previous five campaigns. His criticisms of Israel, it should be noted, were very tame, but enough to bring the wrath of AIPAC upon him. He refused to condemn the Palestinian freedom fighters as terrorists and had visited Libya in 1979. Although he was supported by the African American caucus on the Hill, AIPAC was stronger than that caucus. Consequently, his opponent, Arthur Davis, won the election. Davis received \$300,000 from AIPAC – in stark contrast to the modest \$1,000 Hilliard received from Arab-American organisations.⁶⁵

In the next three years leading up to the election of President Obama, the good times just kept rolling for the lobby. The unholy trinity of Christian Zionism, neo-conservatism and American Jewish lobbying still had immense impact on legislation, elections and policies concerning Israel and Palestine. The Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006 and the first of many brutal Israeli assaults to come on the Gaza Strip triggered a new phenomenon in 2007, a liberal Zionist counter-lobby, J Street; a precursor of the more fundamental challenges that would face the lobby, and in particular AIPAC, in the Obama years and even during Donald Trump's bizarre term in office.

More problematic for AIPAC was the rise of the pro-Palestinian network of solidarity, emerging around campuses, trade unions and small

communities, reacting to the extraordinary cruelty of Israel's retaliation following the second Intifada. AIPAC was swift to try to nip these initiatives in the bud. Every local initiative for active solidarity with Palestinians was confronted with a storm of outrage by the 'Jewish community'; in actuality, the lobby. One early case of AIPAC's deep involvement in a very localised affair was the lobby's intervention in Somerville in the Greater Boston area. It was an early prototype for AIPAC's later *modus operandi*.

THE SOMERVILLE DIVESTMENT PROJECT: 2003–2004

The city of Somerville, in the metropolitan Boston area, is located north of Cambridge in Middlesex County, now numbering over 80,000 inhabitants, famous for its culture of arts and live music and its vibrant student population.⁶⁶ Until 2003, it had no link whatsoever to the Israel/Palestine question. But in the space of one summer, it became a crucial battleground, where Palestine solidarity clashed with Israel's claim to moral legitimacy.

A young high school teacher, Ron Francis, founded the Somerville Divestment Project at the College Avenue Methodist Church. The Project group approached the aldermen (the city councillors) to try and persuade them to declare support for divestment from Israel; more specifically the Somerville Retirement Board, which managed the pensions of the city employees, was asked to sell its Israeli bonds and any stocks in American companies doing military business with Israel. Eight of the eleven aldermen were persuaded by the moral argument and were about to vote in favour of such a resolution. The pro-Israel lobby sprang into action: a flood of letters to the *Somerville Journal* convinced the mayor Joe Curtatone to threaten to veto the resolution. The Israeli Consulate General in Boston, as well as other lobbying organisations, began to organise locally and nationally to prepare for a public debate on 8 November 2004. Each participant had two minutes to talk – the pro-divestment speakers group had many Jewish members (constituting forty per cent). While Iftah Shavit, an ex-Israeli,

supported the project wholeheartedly in an article he wrote, the lobby invited ex-military Israelis, studying or working nearby, to tell the board how unsafe they felt because of the project.

In this David and Goliath battle, it would be David who came out the loser. The council rejected the proposal, with only one of the aldermen, Denise Provost, remaining faithful to their initial support. Nonetheless, this event in a small American city is worth revisiting. Whether the board of the city endorsed the project or not, it would not have changed anything on the ground in Palestine. And yet the pro-Israel lobby mustered all its might to defeat a symbolic gesture by civil society. This small group of Americans only wanted to signal their moral contempt for the actions of the Israeli state.

Denise Provost felt it was the implications of her courageous stance in 2004 throughout her political career that brought her to the Massachusetts House of Representatives, representing the 27th Middlesex District between 2006 and 2020. In her campaign for this post, her rivals constantly reminded the electorate of her 'anti-Israel' stance, and rich businessmen associated with the lobby funded them in the elections. She lost some votes because of this, but managed nonetheless to represent the working-class Middlesex 27th District. Her stance required fortitude, as, like so many before and after her, she was warned that the moral positions she subscribed to were tantamount to political suicide, which was probably true for a number of politicians at the local, state and federal levels.

Initiatives such as the one in Somerville began to blossom in many other parts of the United States, organised by Americans of Palestinian origin, African Americans, Native Americans and other minority groups showing solidarity with the oppressed Palestinians and working in tandem with growing pro-Palestinian activism among American Jewish society. They would become an even more serious challenge to AIPAC after 2004, in particular, as we shall see, after the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006. It was not easy for AIPAC, as the images emerging from the Second Lebanon War became emblematic of the devastation Israel could wreak, further eroding Israel's moral legitimacy in American civil society.

As Walter Hixson tells us, the need to defend Israel's image against the clear evidence of its brutality brought AIPAC even closer to Christian Zionist bodies such as Christians United for Israel, led by an owner of a Texan megachurch by the name of Reverend John Hagee, who became a personal friend of Netanyahu, and was amply rewarded by being invited by him to attend, with President Trump, the opening of the American embassy in Jerusalem in 2018.⁶⁷

The need to airbrush the horrific features of occupation and siege also brought AIPAC closer to the right wing of the Republican Party. By the end of the Bush years, bipartisanship was widely seen as a pretence on AIPAC's part – it seemed firmly aligned with the Republicans. And this brings us to the third track AIPAC was moving on, alongside action vis-à-vis the president and civil society – cementing its connections with twenty-first-century Christian Zionists and the American extreme right.

CHRISTIAN ZIONISM FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AND THE WAR ON ISLAM

For the hard core of Christian Zionists, Operation Shock and Awe, the Anglo-American assault on Iraq in April 2003, looked like a scene out of their own doomsday scenarios. This was the wrath of the Hebrew God that was joyously received by Christian Zionists as well as messianic Jews in Israel, who uncovered a theological basis for the dubious links between Islam, terror and Palestine. The old bestseller *Scofield's Bible* was revived and offered a contemporary fundamentalist reading of Old and New Testaments – interpreted to command support for Israel as a literal article of faith.

After 9/11 this theology had adopted a clear anti-Islamic line. In his important work on the subject, Stephen Sizer has revealed how Christian Zionists constructed a historical narrative that described the Muslim attitude to Christianity throughout the ages as a kind of genocidal campaign directed against both Jews and Christians.⁶⁸ What were once hailed as moments of

Islamic triumph – the Islamic renaissance of the Middle Ages, the *Convivencia* in Al-Andalus, the golden era of the Ottomans, the emergence of Arab independence and the end of European colonialism – were recast as the satanic, anti-Christian acts of heathens. In this new historical view, the US became St George, Israel his shield and spear, and Islam their Dragon.

This new presentation of the old idea of Israel being on the side of Christ and its enemies as the modern Antichrists was delivered in the twenty-first century through a multimedia franchise run by Christian Zionists called the Left Behind Project. It started as sixteen bestseller novels written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, resurrecting the ideas of the Dispensationalists, as if nothing had changed in the intervening century and the apocalyptic prophecies still held as true as ever. The Antichrist this time was ‘global communities’ which represented hatred towards the forces of Christ. From its first film, *Left Behind: The Movie*, screened in 2000, to the latest version in 2014 with Nicolas Cage, through to a PC game, the franchise has made far-fetched Dispensationalist prophecies easily digestible for the American public.⁶⁹

The introduction to the PC game *Left Behind* says it all, reflecting the power of informal lobbying. It enjoins players to support Israel and the equally sacrosanct imperative to identify the Muslims, the Palestinians and the liberals of the world as Antichrists who intend to destroy Israel, unless America defends it.

The following extended quotation is from the fan-made Wikipedia description of the PC game, which defines Israel for the players (who need to help the Jewish state if they want to save the world). It refers to both the film and the game and explains that Israel is:

the land God has given to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by a perpetual covenant ... Jews are considered part of Israel. The enemies of Israel, particularly Muslim countries, refer to Israel as Palestine due to the desire of their national leaders wanting to drive its inhabitants ‘into the sea’ since it became a nation in 1948. Up until this day, the land has remained in constant dispute between the Israelis and the Palestinians.⁷⁰

Under a futuristic interpretation of the Book of Revelation in the Bible, God has not yet fulfilled some of the Old Testament prophecies related to Israel.

The plot of the *Left Behind* series is based on this interpretation and depicts how the authors believe God may fulfil these prophecies in the future.

In the next game in the series, *Rapture*, it is God that defends Israel from the Russians, a rescue operation predicted in the prophecy of Ezekiel chapter 28. In the next instalment, *Tribulation Force*, on another front, Israel reaches a seven-year agreement to exchange knowledge with Nicolae Carpathia and the Global Community (a liberal feminist Satanic coalition led of course by a woman). Israel provides the Global Community with its knowledge of fertilisers(!), and in return, but not in good faith, the Global Community's feminist leader deviously lures Israel into believing that it can rely on the Global Community to defend it. It is clear that this a terrible mistake by Israel, because the Global Community is pro-Russian and pro-Palestinian and, above all, it is a bunch of Antichrists masked as progressive people. And betrayal does come when Nicolae desecrates the temple in Jerusalem. But not to worry: Jesus comes back and defeats the horrible Nicolae, despite the fact that she heads up a massive army (yes, in the battle of Armageddon). And it goes on and on for another battle with Satan's army. The real final chapter in this trajectory is not to be found in the books, the PC games or the film, although it should be part of them: the conversion of the Jews to Christianity (or their barbecuing in Hell).⁷¹

As we can see, the basic notions of Christian Zionism have not changed in the twenty-first century. It continues to interpret the prophetic texts as foretelling the establishment of the state of Israel. A Lifeway poll conducted in the United States in 2017 found that eighty per cent of evangelical Christians believed that the creation of Israel in 1948 was the fulfilment of a biblical prophecy that would bring about Christ's return, and more than fifty per cent of them said that they supported Israel because it is important for the fulfilment of biblical prophecy.⁷²

Christian Zionists were also instrumentalised through a more familiar method of persuasion, used in the past by both secular and religious lobbies: trips to Israel. These trips were no longer just pilgrimages to the holy places of Christianity; instead they involved collective prayers in the very heart of the Holy Land, apparently giving them a better chance of being heard by

God, beseeching him to defend Israel against its enemies, ranging from Russia to progressive humanism.

Islam had gradually replaced Russia as the arch-enemy. Christian Zionists in America now saw their main task as defending Israel from its regional enemies. One of the common ways of showing such a commitment was through these prayer pilgrimages. The most notable of these was a project involving tours to Israel under the banner 'Day of Prayer for the Peace of Jerusalem'. The origins of this initiative lay in the 1990s, when Dan Mazar, the publisher and editor of a Christian Zionist mouthpiece called *Jerusalem Christian Review*, organised the 'World Prayer for Peace in Jerusalem'. This event was broadcast on all the major US TV networks (including CNN) and among the faithful participants were former president Ronald Reagan and the Australian prime minister Bob Hawke, alongside Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and other Christian fundamentalist household names.⁷³

The concept was taken up by two Pentecostal evangelical leaders, Jack W. Hayford and Robert Stearns. They formed an organisation called Eagles' Wings, the purpose of which was to combat various 'dangers' to the Judeo-Christian world, such as secular humanism and radical Islam. And again, the best way to 'combat' these dangers was by showing unconditional support for Israel. In 2006, the two advocates claimed that 150,000 churches around world collaborated in staging these days of prayer.⁷⁴

All these activities were supported by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism and the Israel Allies Foundation (IAF). The IAF is an umbrella organisation of all caucuses within parliaments around the world committed to maintaining Israel as a Jewish state and making Jerusalem the united and eternal capital of Israel.

All the caucuses are modelled on the one in the Israeli Knesset called the Christian Allies Caucus. From the Israeli Knesset, the IAF co-ordinates the work of politicians around the world who are tasked with galvanising support for Israel in their respective parliaments, which include both Houses on Capitol Hill (although their US branch was somewhat redundant, given the plethora of pro-Israel outfits on the Hill). The Christian Allies

Caucus website outlines several red lines it has vowed never to cross, such as never doubting Israel's sovereignty over the whole of Jerusalem.⁷⁵ It has branches in the Philippines, South Korea, Brazil, South Africa, Japan, Australia, Finland, Italy, Canada, Costa Rica and Malawi; altogether by 2021 it had fifty affiliated groups. The perks include tours of Israel.⁷⁶

The prime mover behind the initiative on the Israeli side was Avigdor Lieberman, the leader of the hard right Russian immigrant party, Yisrael Beiteinu. Accordingly, the IAF drifted to the right, co-opted by settlers in the occupied West Bank and by politicians who supported the transfer of Palestinians from the West Bank to Jordan. Its main funder was Irving Moskowitz (who made his money from a diverse portfolio including hospital and casino construction). He passed away in 2016, but his family continued to aid the settlers' projects in the occupied West Bank and, in particular, efforts to de-Arabise greater Jerusalem.

Under the influence of scholars such as Samuel Huntington, the Knesset sought to situate support for Israel as part of a 'clash of civilisations' narrative in which the caucuses contribute to the defence of the Judeo-Christian heritage, legacy or civilisation. This was especially bizarre in light of a millennium of Christian persecution of Jews, from expulsions to pogroms to outright genocide. This now became the hegemonic discourse. Jews and Christians in the lobby for Israel were now committed to protecting 'Judeo-Christian values'. These 'values' really amounted to nothing more or less than unconditional support for Israel. As one of its leading figures, Uri Bank, told the Knesset:

Evangelical Christians are powerful in their countries and they love Israel, but they haven't been taught how to leverage that in our favor ... That is what we're doing.

His colleague Benny Elon added:

The Christian world is Israel's most strategic ally both existentially and spiritually. Existentially, they stand up against radical Islam and their desire to destroy the state of Israel. Spiritually, Christians are our partners in the clash of cultures between our values and those of radical Islam.⁷⁷

With the growing power of the conservative wing of the Republicans, along with what became known as the ‘Tea Party group’, the discourse on Israel was now increasingly determined by Christian fundamentalism. A candidate for the Republicans’ 2016 presidential nomination, Ted Cruz, a senator from Texas and the son of an evangelical minister, made various references to heroic chapters in Jewish history, such as the rebellion against the Greeks at the end of the biblical period. Muslims, in his eyes, were the ‘Greeks’ against whom Israel now had to defend itself. After one of his speeches in New York in front of a Zionist group, one of the organisers noted, with satisfaction:

He’s aligned with the Jewish people. He’s aligned with the Jewish calendar. He understands Jewish history. He understands that Jews, even though they have small numbers, persevere and are victorious ... because God is on Israel’s side. He understands that.⁷⁸

This Christian fundamentalist discourse is also popular among Latin American neo-conservatives. For both Christian fundamentalists and neo-conservatives, Israel is crucial for the defence of America; either because this is God’s will, or because Israel is the bulwark against the new enemies of twenty-first-century America: Iran, Russia and ‘Islamic terrorism’. Combined, religion and neo-conservatism make an incredibly dangerous mixture. Incidentally, Cruz’s loyalty to Israel did not pay off, and he was thoroughly beaten by another ultra pro-Zionist, Donald Trump, in the elections for the Republican candidacy in 2016.

But before we reach the Trump era, when both Christian Zionists and neo-cons had a field day, they and AIPAC had to face a new political star that appeared on the horizon in the Democratic Party, and AIPAC immediately wanted to get its claws into him. AIPAC, after all, has no political allegiances beyond unconditional support for Israel.

History never really repeats itself. But let’s think of a relatively unknown Democratic nominee, who first happily receives help from AIPAC to win the presidency. However, after the election, he bitterly disappoints them – even if he has done nothing that changes the balance of power in

Palestine. Two names come to mind. The first is Jimmy Carter. The second is Barack Obama.

ANOTHER ENEMY IN THE WHITE HOUSE: THE OBAMA YEARS

The day after Senator Barack Obama gained the Democratic nomination for president, he took to the stage at AIPAC's conference to dispel any doubts they might have had and reassure the group's supporters that he was 'a true friend of Israel'. He added:

I want to say that I know some provocative emails have been circulating throughout Jewish communities across the country. A few of you may have gotten them. They're filled with tall tales and dire warnings about a certain candidate for president. And all I want to say is – let me know if you see this guy named Barack Obama, because he sounds pretty frightening.⁷⁹

Obama reminisced at length in his speech about his childhood, and recalled how the elders in his family, such as his grandfather and great-uncle, served during the Second World War, pointing out that since then he had been aware of and concerned about the horrors suffered by the Jews during the Holocaust.

He also pledged to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem: 'Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel and it must remain undivided', he told the AIPAC conference. (But as often happens with presidents, his actions, including those regarding Jerusalem, didn't quite live up to his promises on the campaign trail.)

However, events on the ground made it very difficult for AIPAC to accept Obama as a friend, although this may also have been connected to his African American background and his vociferous opposition to the war in Iraq.⁸⁰

The consistent orientation taken by Israel, ever since Netanyahu came to power on the basis of a coalition of Israel's extreme right, exacerbated the oppression faced by the Palestinians, who by this point had been subject to a colonial project for over a hundred years. A new landmark in this policy of brutalisation was Operation Cast Lead.

On 27 December 2008, a three-week Israeli assault on Gaza began, which left more than 1,400 Palestinians dead and the Strip ruined, with many Palestinians losing their homes, wounded and traumatised. Israeli forces killed four of their own soldiers and lost another six, along with three civilians. This was televised carnage, and the humanitarian crisis that followed was even more high-profile. The Israeli siege continued and made it very difficult to rebuild, treat the injured and re-establish any kind of normality.

A UN commission of inquiry, officially known as the UN Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, was dispatched to the area under the chairmanship of Judge Richard Goldstone, a South African Jew. While condemning Hamas for committing war crimes, it accused Israel of targeting Palestinian civilians intentionally. Since Israel came out of this report very badly, Goldstone was boycotted by his community in South Africa; he was not allowed to attend his grandson's bar mitzvah ceremony at the local synagogue.⁸¹ This may explain why in an op-ed in the *Washington Post* he refrained from accusing Israel of intentionally killing civilians, but the other members of his commission responded with an article in the *Guardian*, restating that this was their major finding.⁸²

Somewhat surprisingly, Obama was quite tame in his reaction to Cast Lead, never blaming Israel directly, so this was not an immediate cause for friction with AIPAC. It was his next step, a historic speech he gave on 4 June 2009 in Cairo (and which won him the Nobel Peace Prize), that provoked AIPAC. He was the first president to refer to the 1948 catastrophe and rebuked Israel for its 'intolerable mistreatment' of the Palestinians. He promised he would support the Palestinians in their desire to establish their own state.⁸³

That same year Benjamin Netanyahu won the elections in Israel and began a second term in office. Since his last term he had established strong connections with Christian Zionists and the Republican right – and like AIPAC he made no pretence at bipartisanship. This did not bode well for the relationship between the two men. From the moment Benjamin Netanyahu was elected in 2009, their relations soured over the Israeli prime

minister's blatant lack of commitment to finding a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Both the Israeli government and AIPAC correctly assumed that Obama would talk the Clintonian talk when it came to Palestine, but had no intention of walking the walk. After all, the personnel in the State Department were practically the same as in Clinton's time. So Obama would allow Israel's actions in Palestine, including expansion of the settlements, Judaisation of large parts of the West Bank, and the harsh siege of the Gaza Strip. His tolerance would extend to defending Israel in the UN and providing it with international immunity.

The talk was indeed there. His statements throughout 2009 called upon Israel to freeze the settlements in the West Bank. AIPAC reacted by organising a petition signed by seventy-six senators and 329 representatives rejecting the call. But the president was forceful enough to extract from Netanyahu a freeze on new housing projects, which he did not intend to fulfil, an infraction which went unpunished by any action by the Obama administration. But vice president Joe Biden was genuinely irritated that the violation of this commitment was announced while he was on an official visit to Israel at the end of 2010.

Obama's secretary of state Hillary Clinton's role was to sweeten the pill every time a harsh condemnation by the president was issued, and the same happened after Biden's visit. AIPAC might have attempted to reciprocate in kind but it was outflanked by its strongest ally in American politics, the Christian Zionists, who did not hesitate to weaponise racism in the struggle against Obama's entirely meaningless 'commitment' to a two-state solution. This African American president was a far cry from their biased image of an American leader. Alongside the Christian Zionists, Glenn Beck, a conservative political commentator who became notorious for his claim that Obama had 'a deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture', joined in the battle against a two-state solution. His message in 2010 sounded like something from the Christian Zionist/AIPAC heyday:

They are going to attack the center of our faith, our common faith, and that is Jerusalem. And it won't be with bullets or bombs. It will be with a two-state solution that cuts off Jerusalem,

the old city, to the rest of the world. It is time to return inside the walls that surround Jerusalem and stand with people of all faiths all around the world.⁸⁴

Beck organised mass demonstrations to convey this message, both in the USA and in Jerusalem. But most importantly of all, his diatribe had endless repeated reruns on *Fox News*.

As described in the first volume of Obama's memoirs, *A Promised Land*, he was essentially bullied by Netanyahu and his supporters during his term in office.⁸⁵ To his detriment, he failed to stand up to this pressure effectively. Netanyahu, meanwhile, made little effort to hide his animosity toward Obama throughout his presidency, going so far as to publicly fête his presidential challenger Mitt Romney in the 2012 US elections.

As for AIPAC's role, its impact can clearly be seen in Obama's memoirs. This book is a valuable source that provides the president's detailed descriptions of his experience as the target of a well-orchestrated campaign. He opens up about the influence of the pro-Israel lobby on US lawmakers. His memoir pointedly describes the difficulties that he and, by his own admission, any US lawmaker faced in pushing through policies opposed by the Israeli government and its allied domestic lobby groups.⁸⁶ Obama paints a stark picture of a US political system that, in a limited but serious way, has been compromised by foreign influence.

The main message from Obama's memoirs is familiar. Any criticism of Israel by US lawmakers, even when Israel had gone against US policy, was subject to the lobby's wrath. Those who criticised Israeli actions 'too loudly' risked being labelled 'anti-Israel' or even 'anti-Semitic'. They could have to contend with a 'well-funded opponent' when elections rolled round. It did not help that seventy per cent of American Jews gave Obama their vote. He had no chance with AIPAC, as they had decided a priori that Obama did not feel his outward support for the Jewish state in his 'guts'.⁸⁷

'By the time I took office', Obama wrote, in a section reflecting on the troubled US history of mediating the Israel/Palestine conflict, 'most congressional Republicans had abandoned any pretence of caring about what happened to the Palestinians.'⁸⁸ Religious commitments had led many white evangelical Republican voters to blindly support the Israeli

government in everything. Obama went on to say that meanwhile, due to electoral and ideological considerations inside the Democratic Party, ‘even stalwart progressives were loath to look less pro-Israel than Republicans.’⁸⁹

Obama might have been thinking about the ordeal his nominee for secretary of state for defence, Chuck Hagel, underwent when his nomination was discussed in Congress. During his hearing before Congress, he was grilled by pro-Israel Congress members about an interview he had given to Aaron David Miller in 2006 when he said: ‘the Jewish lobby intimidates a lot of people [on Capitol Hill]’. Using the word ‘Jewish’ instead of ‘Israel’ opened the door to accusations of anti-Semitism. He went through what Stephen Walt described as the ‘circus’ of a *mea culpa* and had to prove his loyalty to Israel in order to salvage his nomination.⁹⁰

At the heart of the problem, as Obama described it, stood a nexus of pro-Israel lobbying groups and activists in DC that exerted pressure on his presidency at every turn, despite the fact that he considered himself ‘fiercely protective’ of Israel and had provided it with strong economic, political and military support. Obama didn’t seem to think that he was the only one facing this predicament. As he wrote:

Members of both parties worried about crossing the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a powerful bipartisan lobbying organization dedicated to ensuring unwavering US support for Israel.⁹¹

‘I’d delivered on my promise to enhance US–Israel cooperation across the board’, Obama pointed out, lamenting the apparent lack of gratitude in response to this support.

Nevertheless, the noise orchestrated by Netanyahu had the intended effect of gobbling up our time, putting us on the defensive, and reminding me that normal policy differences with an Israeli prime minister – even one who presided over a fragile coalition government – exacted a political cost that didn’t exist when I dealt with the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Japan, Canada, or any of our other closest allies.⁹²

As Israel’s own political drift to the far-right continued, Obama went on to write, AIPAC also maintained a forceful insistence that:

There should be 'no daylight' between the US and Israeli governments, even when Israel took actions that were contrary to US policy.

This created a serious dilemma for any US politician trying to maintain a commitment to liberal principles, let alone those leaning towards the left in any meaningful way. The consequences of crossing AIPAC and other pro-Israel organisations could be dire for any US politician.

Obama described one case in detail which illustrates the kind of pressure he was exposed to, when in 2011 he repeated his call on Israel to freeze settlements. 'White House phones started ringing off the hook' after Obama asked Israeli leaders to freeze settlement activity; he added that he was the target of a 'whisper campaign' that characterised him as hostile to Israel.⁹³ His own Jewish supporters were forced to fight back against this whisper campaign alleging Obama's private hostility toward Israel, which was supposedly proven by his friendships with a few Palestinian academics and periodic expressions of sympathy for those living under Israeli occupation.

These recollections are worth comparing with Obama's speech delivered to the annual AIPAC conference in 2011. Obama did all he could to stress his commitment to 'a strong and secure Israel' as an American national interest and continued to describe Israel in terms that were familiar and pleasant for AIPAC's conference attendees: 'Israel lives in a very tough neighbourhood', which 'I saw first-hand' – referring to a visit to Sderot, the Israeli development town hit by Qassam rockets launched from the Gaza Strip. He further boasted of his contribution to the security collaboration in developing the 'Iron Dome', the anti-rocket defence system, and described it as the best solution for the 'tough neighbourhood': 'It's why we're making our most advanced technologies available to our Israeli allies.'⁹⁴

He received a large round of applause when he defined the course of future sanctions on Iran; little did he know this would be the main bone of contention with AIPAC in his second term in office. He went further by fully adopting the Israeli position on Palestinian unity. Any agreement between Hamas and Fatah, he declared, 'is dangerous' and he repeated the compulsory mantra for any pro-Israel politician: 'Hamas is a terrorist

organization'. In those days, there was an additional demand: the unconditional release of the captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit – with no mention of the thousands of Palestinian political prisoners held by Israel.

There was an indirect clash with Benjamin Netanyahu's position on the Palestine question. Obama referred in his speech to the two-state solution, adding, to applause, a pledge for a 'land swap' and a 'demilitarised state' at an undetermined point in the future.

In Obama's second term, Operation Protective Edge in 2014 brought a new challenge to his relationship with Israel. From 8 July to 26 August 2014 Israel launched its largest operation so far against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, which, as with the operations that preceded it, turned the Strip into a disaster zone, and compounded the already unbearable living conditions caused by years of Israeli siege. The death toll was higher than ever before; 2,300 Palestinians, sixty-six Israeli soldiers and six civilians died during the operation.

Events like this intensified the pro-Palestinian impulse in American society and alternative media, and sometimes fed through to mainstream media in a muted way, but AIPAC initiated frequent legislation and congressional declarations from August 2014 until the end of the year, aimed at justifying the Israeli assault as a war of self-defence. These warm words were accompanied by action. Even before the Israeli assault ended, on 4 August 2014, Congress passed legislation with an overwhelming majority providing Israel with an additional \$225 million on top of its annual aid. It should be stressed that this was a bipartisan initiative.⁹⁵

So powerful was this campaign that Obama's new secretary of state, John Kerry, had to repeatedly scold both sides in Congress and demand that they show restraint. He expressed sorrow for the situation, while his delegation in the UN cast veto after veto on any attempt to condemn Israel in the Security Council.

But there were red lines for the president, as with all presidents, and they were drawn when a deal with Iran on its nuclear capacity was seriously put on the table. While Palestinians may have hoped that the key conflict between Barack Obama and AIPAC and the pro-Israel lobby at large would

be the Palestine issue, they were disappointed by the end of his two terms in office. Obama did clash with the lobby – but Iran was the issue, not Palestine. AIPAC mobilised over an attempt to conclude a final agreement in which Iran was willing to freeze, or at least slow down, its nuclear development in return for removal of the sanctions regime that had hitherto been led by the USA.

THE NETANYAHU–AIPAC SHOWDOWN WITH OBAMA ON IRAN, 2015–2016

On a hot summer day in July 2015, Palais Coburg in Vienna played host to an array of international statesmen. Already over a century old, the palace was redolent of Old World opulence, though now fitted with every modern amenity. It was designed in 1839 by the architect Karl Schleps in neoclassical style, and required high levels of constant maintenance over the years to protect it from the soot that urban modernisation brought with it to many parts of the city. It took five years to build and was finished in 1845. It is located on the site of the city's Braunbasion (brown bastion), dating back to 1555, which was demolished shortly after Palais Coburg was built. It was soon dubbed Spargelburg (the 'Asparagus Castle') by locals in the Austrian capital on account of its thin freestanding columns. The last Sachsen-Coburg-Koháry to own the building was Sarah Aurelia Halász, the widow of Philipp Josias von Sachsen-Coburg-Koháry, who lived there until her death in 1994, although she had sold it to a realtor in 1978. Following renovations in the 2000s, it became a luxury hotel.

The hotel's white façade was polished, and its interior sparkled as it waited to receive a large number of world dignitaries, dropped off by a succession of black saloon cars. The VIP guestlist was headed by the American secretary of state, John Kerry. It was not easy for journalists to see who was arriving, as a green glass screen covered the elegant front entrance to the hotel. But they could still appreciate the beauty of the two storeys, with the asparagus-like columns separating stylish windows. On the

roof stood six statues, holding the old palace's marble emblem. The guests occupied all thirty-three suites that the hotel offered.

The Austrian government went out of its way to make life as comfortable as possible for the negotiation teams. The government footed the guests' bills and offered Austria's trademark wafer biscuits and chocolate *Mozartkugeln* free of charge. Between meetings, the guests were treated to buffet breakfasts, lavish brunches, lunches and dinners every day. As an industrious *Guardian* reporter noted, the Iranians, the Americans and the British seemed to think that their own cuisine was superior (completely inexplicable in the case of the latter group) and each brought their own food: the Iranians green raisins and pistachios, the Americans ten pounds of strawberry-flavoured Twizzlers, twenty pounds of cheese strings and thirty pounds of mixed nuts and raisins. The British team shuttled between Vienna and London, returning with Marks & Spencer biscuits. Only the French seemed to enjoy the local food and even raided the famous wine cellar in the hotel.⁹⁶

But it was not that comfortable. The eighteen days of negotiations were held amid an unprecedented heat wave and, like most continental hotels, the Coburg had yet to adapt to the reality of global warming, so its air conditioning system was relatively weak. So this was a real effort on behalf of diplomats and politicians, most of whom were over sixty, with all the challenges that come with age.

But their efforts bore fruit and, after toiling literally day and night, they put the final touches to what became known as the 'Iran nuclear deal', after agreeing on its principles earlier, on 2 April 2015 in Lausanne, Switzerland. There the USA joined the EU, Russia and China in declaring and signing a deal with Iran that was meant to orient its nuclear capabilities towards peaceful goals. President Barack Obama said this was 'a historic understanding' and called it a very good deal.⁹⁷

This ended a two-year effort by the Obama administration, which had begun in March 2013 when the US commenced a series of secret talks with Iran in Oman. The election of Hassan Rouhani, considered a 'moderate' by the West, as president of Iran accelerated the process and the rapprochement

between the two countries. When Rouhani spoke on the phone with Obama in September that year, this was the first ever contact between American and Iranian heads of state – a historic moment.

An interim agreement had already been signed in Geneva in November 2013, called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and this paved the way for the Vienna agreement.

For President Obama the hard work was only beginning. He knew that he would have to use a presidential veto to overcome the Republican majority in Congress, who also had several allies in the Democratic Party when it came to the Iran nuclear deal. He had the support of 150 Democratic House members, which was the number he needed to sustain the veto.

The main campaign against the deal was run by AIPAC, with some other constituent parts of the formal and informal pro-Israel lobby. AIPAC created a new group: Citizens for a Nuclear Free Iran. The group was furnished with \$20 million. Its prime movers were anonymous, and when the *New York Times* approached two people in the new group to inquire about its financial resources, those involved stated they were not authorised to disclose more detailed information about it.⁹⁸

AIPAC spent large sums of money in the effort to thwart the deal. Forty million dollars were invested in this campaign. Most of the budget was spent on TV ads in the states where undecided lawmakers resided; but in many cases, the lobbyists flew to these states to exert direct pressure on the legislators living there. Sanguinely but wrongly, *The Nation* magazine believed that this act nearly destroyed AIPAC. It did harm the lobby, but in a less disastrous way than predicted by *The Nation*.⁹⁹

This campaign was demanded and orchestrated by the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who, like a good general, came to the battlefield himself, armed with insinuations of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, doomsday scenarios and puerile graphic representations of the Iranian danger sketched on a drawing board.¹⁰⁰ He came to a joint meeting of the two Houses of Congress without an official invitation in March 2015, an appearance brokered by Israel's ambassador to the United

States along with House Speaker John Boehner (Republican, Ohio). This uninvited appearance was seen by the president and the Democratic Party as an insulting breach of diplomatic norms. Many Democrats boycotted Netanyahu's speech, as they rightly pointed out that this was part of a bid to win yet another Israeli national election. However, this show of protest by about fifty Democrats did not prevent his attendance. He gave a speech in front of a joint session of Congress. The grand rehearsal for this speech took place in front of the AIPAC 2015 annual conference in Washington. He also made a webcast, asking the American Jewish community to do all it could to thwart the Iran nuclear deal.¹⁰¹ Most pundits, at the time, believed that this combative speech to Congress in March went down so badly that the deal was sure to be approved.

In the aftermath of this visit, AIPAC began intensive lobbying against the Iran deal. It was directed solely at the Republican Party, as any effort directed towards the Democratic Party proved to be a total failure. The lobby persuaded only two Senate Democrats, and a handful in the House, to join its campaign, while Obama secured more than the thirty-four Senate votes needed to ensure that opponents wouldn't be able to collect the veto-proof two-thirds majority to block the deal.

Obama fought back ferociously. He did not mince his words when he found out that AIPAC had invested almost \$40 million in the campaign against the Iran nuclear deal. He likened those opposing his deal to those who created the drumbeat of war in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

He told AIPAC officials he would 'hit back hard' against particular ads published by AIPAC that frustrated him. AIPAC had used several organisations to spread its ad campaign, which it called the 'blitz campaign'. One such group was Secure America Now, which published an ad showing an interview with a woman whose husband was killed by an IED in Iraq, allegedly produced in Iran. The woman says: 'and now President Obama would do a deal that lets Iran get a nuclear weapon'.¹⁰² Obama enlisted the help of twenty-nine of America's most eminent scientists and nuclear policy experts, including five Nobel Prize winners

and many other luminaries, to strongly endorse the Iran nuclear deal on the pages of the *New York Times*. Richard Garwin, Siegfried Hecker (the former head of the Los Alamos National Laboratory), Freeman Dyson, Sidney Drell, and many other household names, theoretical physicists and arms control experts professed their support.¹⁰³

AIPAC was strong enough to intimidate a few of those who wanted to ally themselves with the president. Congress's Jewish lawmakers came under some of the most intense pressure from anti-deal activists. Rep. Steve Cohen (Democrat, Tennessee), who announced his support for the deal in August, described weathering a barrage of attacks from passionately opposed constituents and others on social media, who questioned his religion, his intelligence and called him a *kapo* – a term used to describe prisoners of Nazi concentration camps who were assigned to supervise forced labour – as they pressurised him to oppose the deal. Cohen and others were quite confident that AIPAC's language was escalating due to encouragement by Ron Dermer, the Israeli ambassador in Washington. What they learned from him was what every liberal Zionist, Jewish or not, would eventually grasp in twenty-first-century America and Britain: support has to be total. As Cohen put it: 'This is it, take it or leave it, and if you're on the other side of it, you're wrong.'¹⁰⁴ However, Cohen thought AIPAC's crude methods of pressurising him and his colleagues backfired and mainly blamed Dermer for worsening AIPAC's position by association.

A similar conclusion was reached by Chris Coons, a Democratic representative from Delaware, who was targeted by the very aggressive AIPAC campaign against particular politicians who hesitated. In his case too, the bellicosity did not bear any fruit. As Coons told the *Washington Post*:

Senators who have been comparably torn on this with whom I've spoken – where the ads in their states are much more aggressive than the ones here – it has backfired ... instead of making them feel compelled to vote against the deal, it has made them feel resentful.¹⁰⁵

Whether or not he was helped by Netanyahu's belligerence, Obama could celebrate a rare victory against the most powerful lobby in Washington.

Obama secured enough backing in the Senate to protect the pact from efforts to dismantle it. Everyone was quick to declare the end of AIPAC's influence on Capitol Hill. Had the White House indeed won a lasting victory in securing the future of the Iran deal? Had AIPAC lost its claim to iron-clad influence over lawmakers on issues pertaining to Israel? In hindsight, we know the answer to both these questions is no. But in 2015, people saw it differently.

Robert Wexler, a congressman from Florida and later the director of the Center for Middle East Peace, thought that AIPAC had become irrelevant and out of touch with the new realities in America, as had Netanyahu:

Prime Minister Netanyahu knows the America that elected Ronald Reagan president. He's completely unfamiliar with the America that elected Barack Obama president. And they are in fact very different Americas.¹⁰⁶

The director of J Street, Jeremy Ben-Ami, thought the same about AIPAC:

It used to be that AIPAC could deliver votes in a situation like this by emphasizing the political cost of going against them. That no longer works as well as it used to, with Democrats in particular, who recognize that the majority of their supporters in the Jewish community support this deal ... The days of AIPAC being able to present itself as the sole voice of American Jews on these issues are over.¹⁰⁷

Indeed, the showdown over the Iranian deal was a milestone in the history of AIPAC. It was the first time that AIPAC had to contend with a competing lobby of any significance: J Street, which sided with Obama's policies both on Palestine and on Iran. More and more alternative voices began to add to the clamour for justice in the public sphere. These voices had always been there, but before they could not be heard over the noise of the pro-Israel lobby.

COUNTER-LOBBIES

J Street was founded in the latter half of 2007. Its message was simple: being pro-Israel meant being pro-peace. It was promoted as an antithesis to the new discourse that Benjamin Netanyahu was propagating in Israel, and

that AIPAC had adopted, which equated liberal Zionism with anti-Israel stances and even anti-Semitism. It resembled what AIPAC could have been, had it not entrenched itself on the hard right of the political spectrum.

Its stated goal was to push the US into the role of an exclusive peace broker for a two-state solution, in a form accepted by liberal Zionist parties in Israel. Their efforts misfired somewhat when they opposed the recognition of Palestine as an independent state in the UN in 2011.¹⁰⁸ It is therefore very difficult to detect any clear policy of theirs on the Palestinian issue. On the one hand, J Street has devoted a special section on its website to proudly listing all the times it has condemned the Palestinian Authority.¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, in January 2011, it recommended to President Obama not to veto a Security Council resolution condemning Israel's settlement policy. By 2012, J Street became more positively involved in supporting the idea of a Palestinian state – a position that manifested itself in their effort to block two Republican members of the House who were trying to pass legislation against American support for the Palestinian Authority and helped to foil this initiative, which also cost the two Republicans their seats in the next election.¹¹⁰

Given the background of its main funders and fundraisers (such as Alan Solomont, the principal fundraiser for the Democrats), it seems J Street's main purpose was to fill the vacuum in American Jewish politics produced by the overt hostility of AIPAC towards the Democratic Party.¹¹¹ Even if liberal Zionism seemed to be in decline in Israel, J Street asserted that it was still a relevant political tendency in the US.

J Street's mode of action imitated AIPAC's methods, namely associating funding and support for political candidates with the hope of winning their loyalty to the lobby's policies. By 2016, J Street had invested several million dollars in such activities that, according to its own report, related to 124 candidates. Like AIPAC, J Street had its Educational Fund and its own student union. One striking difference from AIPAC was its willingness, indeed its desire, to receive donations from non-Jewish sources including the Lebanese American businessman Naseer Beydoun.¹¹²

J Street funding equals roughly a tenth of AIPAC funding. It is difficult to gain a clear picture of either lobby's budget. According to American law, organisations are promised confidentiality on the question of funding – the last publicised budget of AIPAC was in 2013, when it was stated to be \$66 million dollars,¹¹³ and today the estimate is \$300 million. In the case of J Street, a public discussion about its funding was less about the amount and more about the source. The tabloid *Washington Times* claimed that George Soros donated around fifteen per cent of the lobby's budget (it is illegal to receive financial support from foreign interests in America).¹¹⁴ As long as Benjamin Netanyahu was in power (2009–2021), it was not clear who J Street represented, as the Israeli government refused to work with it. Naftali Bennett's shaky coalition government of 2021 included parties that had close ties with J Street, a political constellation that gave more credence to the idea of a liberal Zionist lobby; however, this was only a brief interlude before Netanyahu returned to power. It remains to be seen if liberal Zionism will exert any influence at all, in either Israel or the US.

J Street was not alone in acting as a counterweight to AIPAC. During Obama's presidency, Arab-American and Palestinian-American organisations began to put forward their own narrative, which found more and more listeners. So far, they have not been able to shape policy in the same way that the pro-Israel lobby has. But at certain times, they have been able to make significant interventions – and so they merit examination, starting from their origins in smaller groups under the administration of Bush Sr.

After a relatively long silence, the 'Arabists' made their voices heard again in support of Palestine during George Bush Sr's term. Unfortunately, they held only junior positions and played no role in the decision-making process that shaped American policy in the Middle East in the period between the Oslo Accords and Netanyahu's second term in office (1993–2009). In 2003, the veterans among the 'Arabists' dispatched an impressive petition that accused George Bush Jr of severely damaging the American national interest by occupying Iraq and uncritically backing Israeli policies.¹¹⁵ However, the impact of this was blunted – American policy had

proceeded along pro-Israel lines for too long for it to change course so rapidly. By the time of the Bush Jr presidency, they could not have woken America up.

Nonetheless, this dissenting foreign policy perspective was further strengthened by the establishment of the American Educational Trust (AET), known for its publication, the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*. The AET was founded in 1982 by retired US foreign service officers as a counter-lobby to AIPAC in order to influence US policy not only towards Israel, but towards the Middle East as a whole. Like the 'Arabists' before them, their message was based on profound knowledge of the area and its history and culture. Among them were former ambassadors, officials from various government agencies and members of Congress (although just a handful of the latter).

The AET was also very effective in unearthing more clandestine activity by AIPAC – but the pro-Israel lobby was more apprehensive of J Street. AIPAC tried to counter the new lobby by founding a specific action group to challenge the new kid on the block. William Kristol gathered a group of right-wing Republicans in 2010, declaring it was inspired by J Street, mainly as the model of a relatively small advocacy group that makes big waves. The 'big wave' Kristol wanted to create was equating any and every criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism. This ploy would be perfected on the other side of the Atlantic, as we shall see. But this strategy never needed to be realised in full in the US, as by 2015 Israel demanded that every member of the lobby focused their attention on Obama's Iran policy. Once again the pro-Israel lobby had to enlist the Christian Zionists, who regarded Obama as the new Antichrist and were happy to oblige.¹¹⁶ However, the AET and J Street were part of a broader coalition that integrated into the Palestine solidarity movement in civil society, and on university campuses in particular. After the repeated Israeli assaults on the Gaza Strip in 2006, 2008–2009, 2012 and 2014, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Palestinians, this movement gathered momentum. At the heart of this movement were young Americans from Muslim, Arab and Palestinian backgrounds, working in tandem with progressive Jews, African Americans,

Native Americans and other groups of committed students through a network of Palestine solidarity groups. These are incrementally changing the political landscape of American campuses to this day.

And yet with all these counter-advocacies, and Obama's brave performance in his showdown with Netanyahu on the Iran deal, we have to remember that this victory required a presidential veto. Dependence on the presidency would be a risky strategy for AIPAC's opponents. When Trump entered the White House, AIPAC took pride of place in American policy once more, and the clock was set back on further negotiations with Iran. Like the AWACS deal under Reagan, the Iran nuclear deal was a bitter reminder of AIPAC's limitations, but they were confident in their ability to bounce back. Nevertheless, clear harm was done: this affair further damaged AIPAC's relationship with the Democratic Party. Whenever there is a Democratic president, like Joe Biden at time of writing, there is potential for AIPAC's influence to lose its edge – although we are still waiting for that happen.

On the other hand, if AIPAC had not been so self-centred, it would have noticed that the really important thing for the pro-Israel lobby was that Israel benefited from huge aid deals during the Obama presidency, including a mammoth \$38 billion package during its final year.

This is why AIPAC's utter intransigence about Iran was bizarre – under Obama, Israel received more generous military aid than it had at any point since 1948. And yet when the showdown on Iran unfolded, his largesse to Israel was forgotten entirely. The lobby, with all its sixty-five years of experience behind it, was willing to be consumed by the ambition of one man who saw the battle over the Iran deal as his ticket to staying in his comfortable abode on Balfour Street – the official residence of the Israeli prime minister.

Was there an alternative? Yes, but it required a Herculean amount of political will. We got a hint of what Obama's presidency could have looked like in the administration's parting gesture when the USA abstained during a vote on a December 2016 UN Security Council resolution, condemning Israel's continued settlement-building activities in the occupied West Bank

and East Jerusalem. Previous administrations would have voted against such a condemnation as a matter of course. It was Obama's last action on Palestine, and he could only find the will to do it when his presidential career was over.

The new president, elected in one of the most controversial contests in US history, was ready to turn a new page in the government's relationship with AIPAC. And AIPAC was only too happy to overlook his unfortunate statements about Jews.

A TROUBLED RELATIONSHIP, FOR AIPAC BUT NOT FOR ISRAEL, UNDER TRUMP

The final ad in Donald Trump's successful campaign to win the presidential elections in 2016 showed images of Jews, such as the billionaire George Soros and the Federal Chair Janet Yellen, as representing global power that corrupts governments. This dovetailed with an outrageous comment by the candidate in the wake of a neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, asserting that of those involved were 'very fine people'.¹¹⁷ There were some who felt that these reckless remarks may have given some encouragement to those associated with the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting which killed eleven people.¹¹⁸

On the face of it, Trump's conduct did not bother AIPAC, to the point that they invited him to their conference in 2016. However, unlike the Israeli government, which, under Netanyahu, had many outspoken anti-Semitic allies such as Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, AIPAC could not easily ignore anti-Semitic allies.

Trump's anti-Semitic rhetoric and action caused several individuals and organisations affiliated with AIPAC to ask the lobby not to invite him. These groups included the Workers' Circle, IfNotNow, and an ad hoc group, Jews Against Trump, that distributed a petition stating that 'As Jews and as Americans, we condemn hate speech in all its forms.'¹¹⁹ The Workers' Circle's petition stated: 'We are horrified by your invitation to Donald

Trump to speak at the upcoming policy conference and we call on you to withdraw it immediately.’¹²⁰

IfNotNow is a group of young Jews opposed to AIPAC’s views. Its website describes the group as ‘a movement of American Jews’ calling to ‘end US support for Israel’s apartheid system and demand equality, justice and a thriving future for all Palestinians and Israelis’.¹²¹ Unsurprisingly, they used the harshest words against the president:

If there is anyone who should stand up to a neo-fascist who threatens and intimidates minorities it’s the American Jewish community. American Jews have long fought for freedom and dignity for all people because of our history of persecution by strongmen who blamed us for society’s woes.¹²²

A day before Trump spoke, the Union for Reform Judaism, representing the largest Jewish denomination in North America, stated:

The Reform Movement and our leaders will engage with Mr Trump at the AIPAC Policy Conference in a way that affirms our nation’s democracy and our most cherished Jewish values. We will find an appropriate and powerful way to make our voices heard.¹²³

Petitions were followed by a mass demonstration outside the convention hall under the banner ‘Come Together Against Hate’, whose organisers declared their intention to walk out on Trump’s speech:

We are committed to saying that Donald Trump does not speak for us or represent us, and his values are not AIPAC’s values. They are not the values of the Jewish community.¹²⁴

But this criticism did not lead to a disinvitation; neither did Trump’s populist diatribes against rivals in the Republican Party such as Ted Cruz and John Kasich and the Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton.

Indeed, anti-Trump critics were voices in the wilderness. The rank and file of AIPAC, and most of its leaders, warmly welcomed Trump, who stated, ‘I am a newcomer to politics, but not to backing the Jewish state.’ Every sentence he uttered about what he had done for Israel was received with loud applause.

Most of his speech was devoted to how he would deal with Iran. He accused Iran of funding ‘terrorism’ not only in the Gaza Strip but also in the

West Bank. The rest was a tirade about the way Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama had treated Israel: ‘very, very badly’.

Believe it or not, he needed to read this particular sophisticated line from the teleprompter and did not utter it off the cuff. But he could not resist veering off script to describe Hillary Clinton, formerly Obama’s secretary of state, as a ‘total disaster’. To the apparent embarrassment of some of the senior officials of AIPAC, Trump received a roar of approval when he called Barack Obama ‘maybe the worst thing to happen to Israel’.¹²⁵

The next section of the speech was a total fabrication of a scenario in which the UN would impose a solution on Israel and only Trump would be able to stop it. He characterised the Obama years as ‘the days of treating Israel like a second-class citizen’. He accused the Palestinian Authority of fomenting a culture of hatred towards Jews and claimed that ‘Already half of the population of Palestine has been taken over by the Palestinian ISIS and Hamas’ – points taken from Netanyahu’s speeches. More ironically, he claimed that ‘Israel does not name public squares after terrorists’. As an Israeli, I can name many, many squares named after Zionist terrorists in Irgun and Stern – but of course they are heroes of the Jewish state.

He closed by reverting to personal invectives against Clinton and Obama and got the AIPAC crowd to give him a standing ovation. Judging by the body language of AIPAC leaders during that diatribe, it seems it made them squirm in their chairs somewhat.

It is possible that those who opposed his invitation did not make their voices heard because of a pre-warning they received from AIPAC in the form of an email sent to conference attendees, stating that any vocal disruption of Trump’s speech would result in a permanent ban from AIPAC events. The email reads in part:

You are welcome to disagree with a speaker, but you are expected to do so silently and respectfully, in a way that reflects the higher order values of AIPAC and of yourself as an activist. If you choose to disrupt the program, understand that you will be removed, your conference credentials will be taken, and it will be the last AIPAC event you attend.¹²⁶

As a president, Trump was divisive and promised to implement policies that contradicted the value system that most Jews in America regarded as sacrosanct. His promises to round up immigrants and build a wall on the Mexican border caused unease among many who attended the 2016 convention. Officially AIPAC denounced Trump's blunt criticism of Obama at the conference. The day after Trump's show, AIPAC's president, Lillian Pinkus, broke away from the planned agenda to distance the organisation from Trump's remarks. 'Last evening, something occurred which has the potential to drive us apart, to divide us', Pinkus said, and added:

We say unequivocally that we do not countenance ad hominem attacks and we take great offence against those that are levied against the president of the United States of America from our stage. Let us take this moment to pledge to each other that in this divisive and tension-filled political season ... those who wish to divide our movement from the left or from the right will not succeed in doing so.¹²⁷

She concluded by remarking that Trump's outburst undermined the group's efforts to broaden the base of the pro-Israel movement, and stated that 'We are disappointed that so many people applauded a sentiment that we neither agree with nor condone.' She seemed to forget that AIPAC itself had invited Trump onto the stage.

If you were an AIPAC leader, you could always do both: condone and condemn in the same sentence. In reality, AIPAC was overwhelmingly satisfied with Trump and his proposed policies, including the pledge to move the US embassy to Jerusalem – a promise he fulfilled during his first year of presidency – and his objection to the Iran deal.

Indeed, it should have been easier for AIPAC and the pro-Israel lobby in general when Donald Trump was elected. He and those around him should have epitomised the unholy trinity of neo-cons, pro-Israel Jews and Christian Zionists. But it was more complicated than that. His political messaging, from before he became the Republican nominee, through to his unsuccessful 2020 campaign, had unavoidable anti-Semitic undertones. In 2018, during the mid-term elections, Soros once more starred in Trump's anti-Semitic rhetoric, when he accused the billionaire of secretly funding immigration to the USA.¹²⁸

But AIPAC ignored this. After all, this was the president who moved the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, took the US out of the Iran nuclear deal and recognised Israel's sovereignty over the occupied Syrian Golan Heights.

We know now that the Trump administration not only killed the Iran deal by withdrawing from it; it also provided immunity for a more aggressive Israeli policy towards Iran, which gave the green light for operations such as the assassination of the Iranian nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, which was probably carried out by Israel with possible US support. This was a sledgehammer blow against the Iran nuclear deal. Shortly after, President Donald Trump withdrew from the deal, which was signed by Iran, on the one side, and the US and four other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and Germany, on the other, as part of a broader campaign to undo Obama's achievements in office.¹²⁹

In 2018, a video was leaked of Netanyahu boasting about coaxing Trump into pulling the US out of the nuclear agreement: 'We convinced the US president [to exit the deal], and I had to stand up against the whole world and come out against this agreement', Netanyahu said in the video, aired on Israel television.¹³⁰

This is what really mattered for Netanyahu, and hence AIPAC had to continue to swallow Trump's anti-Semitism quietly. AIPAC refused to condemn Trump's adviser, Steve Bannon, despite the allegations of anti-Semitism surrounding him.¹³¹ One person who made allegations about Bannon was his ex-wife, who recalled that when they were considering which school to send their daughters to, he rejected any school that had Jews in it and he said that 'he doesn't like Jews and that he doesn't like the way they raise their kids to be "whiney brats" and that he didn't want [his] girls going to school with Jews.' Bannon denied he ever made these remarks. What he could not deny was his statement in a document that warned of an Islamic jihad against America, which he presented to Trump, and in which he described the 'American Jewish Community' as among the 'unwitting enablers of Jihad'.¹³² At the end of the day, Trump was an asset

in the eyes of the pro-Israel lobby – they did not need to worry about what he did in office. They could turn their attention to an issue that had become increasingly pressing: the shift in American public opinion towards sympathy for the Palestinians, a process that began in 2001 and has accelerated ever since.

THE END OF TRUMP'S TERM

While Netanyahu could only be pleased with Trump's policies, the president did not forget the rebuke he had received from AIPAC's leadership for his violation of the code of conduct in attacking President Obama. He therefore snubbed AIPAC for the rest of his presidency, and did not appear again in person at its annual conferences.

For \$600 you could attend the 2017 annual AIPAC conference. But for that money you could only listen to Vice President Michael Pence repeating the president's promises to move the American embassy to Jerusalem. You could also hear Senator Kamala Harris (later Biden's vice president) singing the praises of the Israel government and AIPAC. She and other Democrats were courted by the leadership, if not by the rank and file. It was good to see Democrats, said Lillian Pinkus, the president of AIPAC. But you could also encounter, at the entrance to the conference hall, a small group of members of IfNotNow carrying a banner that read 'Jews won't be free until Palestinians are. Reject #AIPAC. Reject occupation.'¹³³

This particular annual conference attempted to showcase its support among the Black community, including Ethiopian Jews, to negate the impression created by Black Lives Matter that younger Black activists were largely supportive of Palestine. To counter this, a special event for African Americans was organised by the Israel Project (a pro-Israeli lobby group founded in 2002 by Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, a PR adviser and businesswoman who decided to add to AIPAC's efforts with her own organisation, which lasted until 2019). This was held in the unique setting of the restaurant Rosa Mexicano, located in the Capitol's Penn Quarter, in

the restored 1924 Hecht Company building, an architectural marvel with fourteen-foot wraparound windows. It was the first branch of Rosa Mexicano – a renowned Mexican chain – to open outside New York City in December 2003. The Project invited anyone who was part of a Black community for a special dinner. After the meeting the Project widely publicised this alleged all-Black support for Israel.¹³⁴

Despite these efforts, African Americans, including Black Lives Matter activists, and Native Americans became important members of the informal rainbow coalition showing solidarity with the Palestinian struggle for liberation. The alliance between Black liberation in the States and the Palestine solidarity movement has strong historical roots: the Black Panthers met with the PLO in Algiers, and republished PLO speeches.

The 2018 annual AIPAC conference celebrated the move of the embassy, but again Trump was not present, and this time Mike Pence's star was eclipsed by Nikki Haley, the American ambassador to the UN. But the keynote speaker was Benjamin Netanyahu, who appeared in person as he needed AIPAC for his domestic campaigns. He was losing popularity in Israel. In his thirty-minute speech, he compared Trump to the Babylonian King Cyrus who allowed the Jews to return and build the second temple.¹³⁵

Leading Democrats did not lag behind in invoking the Old Testament as a way of showing unconditional support for Israel. The prominent Democratic politician and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer blamed the deadlock in Israel and Palestine squarely on the fact that the Palestinians had the temerity to not believe in the Torah:

Of course, we say it's our land, the Torah says it, but they don't believe in the Torah. So that's the reason there is not peace.¹³⁶

No Christian Zionist or neo-con could have put it better.

Here too, and this time in growing numbers, protesters demanded that the conference be shut down. Around 500 demonstrators chanted, 'Hey, hey, ho, ho, AIPAC has got to go!' (a new iteration of a chant that dates back to the 1950s).¹³⁷

The 2019 annual conference was a different affair, marred not just by protesters outside the building, but by some of the Democratic candidates vying for the presidential nomination choosing not to appear at the conference, as had long become conventional. But as for Trump's sour relationship with AIPAC, it was all forgotten when Trump was reinvited to the 2019 conference, in a showcase of the 2020 candidates. Although he did not appear in person, he was undoubtedly the favourite candidate. But some cracks in this relationship had become clear, despite the very strong alliance between the White House and AIPAC during his presidency.

AIPAC was still trying to preserve some vague semblance of bipartisanship. For instance, it opposed a move by Israel and Trump to bar the Democratic representatives Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib from entering Israel. Omar and Tlaib, the first two Muslim women elected to Congress, have frequently criticised Israel's treatment of Palestinians and expressed support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. They have frequently been joined by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in a brave trio condemning Israeli policies. That support was cited by the Israeli government as the basis for blocking them from entering the country.

The BDS movement is a Palestinian non-violent resistance movement promoting all these three modes of actions against Israel to pressure it to respect the basic civil rights of the Palestinians that are rooted in international law: the right of the refugees to return, the right of people not to live under occupation or siege in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and the right of the Palestinians in Israel to live in full equality. It was inspired by the anti-apartheid movement that galvanised support for the African National Congress's liberation struggle. Since its inception in 2005, it has been very successful in reinvigorating the dormant solidarity movement and persuading unions and churches around the world to rethink their financial connections to Israel. One of its more successful campaigns was an academic boycott which led to dozens of student unions, universities and professional academic associations giving up official contact with Israeli academia. It was able to persuade leading global cultural figures in music, literature, poetry and theatre to follow suit. These included, among others,

Arundhati Roy, Iain Banks, Judith Butler, Naomi Klein, Ken Loach, Angela Davis, Roger Waters, Elvis Costello, Gil Scott-Heron, Lauryn Hill, Faithless, MK King, U2, Bjork, Zakir Hussain, Jean-Luc Godard and Snoop Dogg.

It is noteworthy that the BDS movement is supported by 150 NGOs and outfits within Palestinian civil society. AIPAC tweeted in response to the decision of Israel to disallow Omar and Tlaib's visit:

We disagree with Reps. Omar and Tlaib's support for the anti-Israel and anti-peace BDS movement, along with Rep. Tlaib's calls for a one-state solution. We also believe every member of Congress should be able to visit and experience our democratic ally Israel first hand.¹³⁸

And the head of the American Jewish Committee, David Harris, put out a statement siding with AIPAC, saying that 'Israel did not choose wisely' in this decision. Harris wrote:

While we are under no illusions about the implacably hostile views of Reps. Omar and Tlaib on Israel-related issues, we nonetheless believe that the costs in the US of barring the entry of two members of Congress may prove even higher than the alternative.¹³⁹

Among the detractors was the New York Democratic Representative, Eliot Engel, who also called the move a 'mistake', saying in a statement that this decision would 'only strengthen the anti-Israel movements and arguments' and that it depicted Israel as if it was 'closing itself off to criticism and dialogue'. Engel said he told Israeli ambassador Ron Dermer his views on the move. Even Senator Marco Rubio thought it was a mistake, as did another friend of AIPAC, Ted Deutch, the Democratic Representative from Florida, who said he was 'disappointed' with Israel's decision, and questioned Trump's encouragement of the move in a tweet.

Although this particular Trumpian move led to protests from unexpected politicians and organisations, it did not indicate a fundamental change of attitude in Congress regarding the Palestine question. Omar and Tlaib are still constantly attacked by AIPAC with all the traditional smears and strong allegations that the lobby has deployed in the past against critics of Israel. Even when their right to travel to Israel was defended by AIPAC, each

rebuke of Israel's decision was immediately qualified by a condemnation of the two representatives.¹⁴⁰

However, what was really important in this affair was not AIPAC's defence of American democracy, but the potential shift in the young Democrats' perceptions of Israel. No amount of money invested by AIPAC would change the views of Ilhan Omar or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez about Israel. As Natan Sachs, at the time the director of the Centre for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington, observed:

The Democratic Party now has a younger generation that views the Israel–Palestine conflict through the lens of human and civil rights rather than a question of security and terrorism.¹⁴¹

The shift was visible at AIPAC's annual conference in 2019. As mentioned, most of the Democrats seeking the party's nomination in 2020 did not participate in it. This act was supported by seventy-four per cent of the party members according to one poll (while a March 2019 Gallup Poll found that only twenty-six per cent of American Jews approved of Trump's presidency). Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, Bernie Sanders, Beto O'Rourke, Pete Buttigieg and Julian Castro all stayed away. Bernie Sanders summarised for all of them the reason: they would not support an organisation that provided a platform for 'leaders who express bigotry and oppose basic Palestinian rights'.¹⁴²

These decisions not to attend were made after prominent liberal group MoveOn.org called on all Democratic candidates vying for the party's presidential nomination to boycott the conference. Iram Ali, campaign director for MoveOn.org, wrote in a statement:

It's no secret that AIPAC has worked to hinder diplomatic efforts like the Iran deal, is undermining Palestinian self-determination, and inviting figures actively involved in human rights violations to its stage.¹⁴³

The very familiar last-minute routine on the opening day of an AIPAC annual convention was carried out as usual on 24 March 2019. The technicians added the finishing touches and readied the Washington Convention Center for the AIPAC meeting that would conclude on 26 March. The LED panels were lit up for a final check, showing two

interlinked Stars of David, one red, one blue, and at the point at which they intersected, they shone together as a sparkling purple light, signalling bipartisanship – a rare commodity in America by 2019.

The 2019 convention was one of the first ones when AIPAC openly and officially identified with the extreme right-wing settler movement in Israel. How far AIPAC, and for that matter Israel, had moved to the right could be seen from the invitation given to Oded Revivi, a leader of an illegal Jewish settlement council in the occupied West Bank, to the conference. A very grateful Revivi told the *Jerusalem Post*:

AIPAC has finally realised that they cannot ignore half-a-million people living in Judea and Samaria, who are becoming more and more attractive to the audience of AIPAC.¹⁴⁴

Ahead of the event, there was anxiety among conference organisers that turnout would be low and would expose AIPAC's decreasing popularity. Those fears were not borne out: the halls were packed and AIPAC boasted of preparing 25,000 hot dogs for those attending.

During the conference, President Trump signed a proclamation recognising the Golan Heights as part of the state of Israel; AIPAC's crowning achievement in 2019. In Israel, however, political chaos prevented widespread joy about AIPAC's achievement or Trump's presence. Twice, in April and September, Israel went to the polls with no clear result and Netanyahu ruled for most of the year as an interim prime minister. By December it was clear that in 2020 there would be another election campaign. It seems once more the lobby, and in particular AIPAC, had their own concerns and were not involved in the dramatic debate about the future of the state they had been advocating for since its inception.

Once more Trump did not appear at the 2020 annual conference and sent his vice president Pence, but issued strong condemnation of the Democratic candidates who refused to attend, calling them anti-Jewish.

The 2020 conference was a charged affair: Netanyahu appeared alongside his rival, who began to challenge him seriously. Benny Gantz of the Blue and White Party (whose Hebrew name literally means 'the State Camp', although in the media it is referred to as the National Unity Party).

To make sure that guests would not be interrupted at this event, in addition to the recorded requests at the outset of plenary sessions, two top board members took to the stage and pleaded for comity. One was Amy Friedkin of San Francisco, a past president of AIPAC who was close to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. The other, Alan Franco of New Orleans, was a major funder of the Republican campaigns. ‘The best way to persuade us is with facts, not fire’, Friedkin stated, and Franco urged activists to refrain from cheering those who attacked political rivals.¹⁴⁵

There was little reason to worry about such interruptions when Pence appeared on the podium, once more in the name of the absentee president. To repeated standing ovations, he listed Trump’s Israel-related moves – moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, cutting funding for Palestinians (both to the Palestinian Authority and the UNRWA, the UN agency supporting Palestinian refugees) and leaving the Iran nuclear deal – and drew even louder applause when he attacked Bernie Sanders, misquoting the senator, but that did not matter to anyone. Pence culminated his speech with a call to re-elect Trump:

The most pro-Israel president in history must not be replaced by one who would be the most anti-Israel president in the history of this nation, that’s why you need four more years of President Trump in the White House.¹⁴⁶

This rhetoric made the twin red and blue Stars of David lighting up the conference hall into a token gesture. But in 2020, AIPAC could still boast some Democratic support. Chuck Schumer and Mike Bloomberg attended the 2020 conference in person, while Joe Biden made an appearance via video link. The Democrats were only too happy to win the hearts of the AIPAC conference attendees.

The participating Democrats proved that bipartisanship within AIPAC could only be claimed against the backdrop of unwavering support for Israel and obedience to AIPAC’s official line. Senator Cory Booker, a New Jersey Democrat who dropped out of the presidential race in 2018, got what was until that point the longest round of applause for a barnstorming speech upholding US–Israel ties:

I see it as my duty to protect the bipartisan nature of this relationship of Israel with the United States ... as long as the people of Israel have to live under the threat of indiscriminate violence ... we must always as a matter of human values stand for Israel's security and defence.¹⁴⁷

AIPAC made a nominal effort to represent the more progressive views of the American Jewish community, such as those of J Street. Attendees could go to an AIPAC-sponsored off-site session for 'peace builders', backing the two-state solution, which was well attended and included appearances by AIPAC's CEO, Howard Kohr, and president, Betsy Berns Korn – but was closed to the press. From Korn's opening speech it was clear that this was peace *à la* Trump, whom Korn warmly thanked for 'releasing a peace proposal that was developed in consultation with the leaders of Israel's two major political parties' – a known formula for building a Palestinian Bantustan in the West Bank's area A (comprising sixteen per cent of the West Bank).

A fringe session called 'Promoting Palestinian Prosperity' included four panellists who were American or Israeli. When someone from the floor asked why there were no Palestinians on the panel, one of the panellists – Brad Gordon, a top retired official of the lobby – agreed that it would have been a good idea to invite one. And there you are, as they say.

The unmistakable American-accented baritone of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu boomed on the last day of the convention, as he addressed a crowd of up to 18,000 participants. He was then in the final throes of his bid for re-election. He did not make it to the convention in person, so the crowd watched him through a patchy satellite feed on gigantic blue screens; although Netanyahu had met with President Donald Trump in Washington that week, he cut short his trip after yet another round of Israeli assaults on the Gaza Strip unfolded. It was difficult to hear what Netanyahu was saying at times, but the audience didn't care: the staunch supporters of Israel who filled the room gave him standing ovations. The only other speaker who won nearly as much applause that Tuesday morning was David Friedman, the US ambassador to Israel. He brought greetings from Trump, 'Israel's greatest ally ever to reside in the White House', as he

put it. But his lauding of Trump paled in comparison to Netanyahu's praise for the president during his meeting with him at the White House the day before. Again, Netanyahu compared Trump to King Cyrus, and to Harry Truman, the US president who first recognised the state of Israel.¹⁴⁸

At the end of the day, the 2020 conference was a cheerleading display for Netanyahu and Trump. Netanyahu needed this conference much more than Trump did. All the usual audio-visual histrionics turned the conference into a rally championing his premiership in the coming Israeli elections.

For all that AIPAC fêted Trump, it was not enough to push him over the line in the 2020 elections, where he lost to Joe Biden. Of course, Biden had been the one Democratic candidate who did not boycott the 2019 conference, and also appeared at the 2020 convention via video link, promising to fight anti-Semitism and champion a secure Israel.¹⁴⁹ AIPAC had no reason to fear the newcomer at the White House.

EARLY BIDENISM: MUCH OF THE SAME?

The pro-Trump riot on Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021 presented a conundrum for AIPAC. The man they had previously celebrated as a true friend of Israel had now become politically toxic. AIPAC broke with its convention of not commenting on domestic conflicts in the US and tweeted:

We share the anger of our fellow Americans over the attack at the Capitol and condemn the assault on our democratic values and process ... This violence, and President Trump's incitement of it, is outrageous and must end.¹⁵⁰

The Anti-Defamation League followed suit with its own tweet:

The violence at the US Capitol is the result of disinformation from our highest office ... Extremists are among the rioters in DC supporting President Trump's reckless rhetoric on America's democratic institutions.¹⁵¹

Other member groups of the pro-Israel lobby decided not to go too far in blaming the former president directly, keeping their powder dry in the eventuality that he made a comeback. The American Jewish Committee demanded that Trump 'call for an immediate end to the riots and respect the

certification process currently underway’, conveniently overlooking the fact that Trump instigated the riot with his inflammatory speech. A similar stance was adopted by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, who were also careful not to name Trump at all:

We are disgusted by the violence at the US Capitol and urge the rioters to disperse immediately ... Law and order must be restored, and the peaceful transition of administrations must continue.¹⁵²

Once the embers of the January insurrection had turned to ash, AIPAC swiftly embraced Trump again, along with all those who questioned the results of the 2020 elections.¹⁵³ It remains an open question as to what extent AIPAC still enjoys the support of the Jewish community, or even if it needs it at all. It’s quite possible that AIPAC could become the domain of affluent Jews alone, but still be a formidable lobbying force.

Aaron David Miller, former adviser to six secretaries of state and Middle East programme director at the Wilson Center, predicted that under Biden, AIPAC, while persisting as ‘a powerful voice’, unlike in the past would not be able to veto US Middle East policy. Neither AIPAC nor the Israeli government was able to prevent the return of the Americans to the negotiating table with Iran.¹⁵⁴

But reviving the Iran deal didn’t require much courage on Biden’s part. It was a reaffirmation of a tacit understanding between AIPAC and the White House, which had existed since Gerald Ford’s time, that AIPAC could and should influence policy on the Palestine issue, but it could not wield decisive power over America’s policy towards the Middle East region. AIPAC’s histrionics over the US’s relations with other Arab states were the deviation from the norm, not America’s willingness to negotiate with Iran.

The battle in the US today is staged between progressive Americans, including Jews, and the administration’s policies, be they Democrat or Republican, towards apartheid inside Israel; the occupation of the West Bank; the ethnic cleansing in Jerusalem, south Hebron, the Jordan Valley

and the Naqab; as well as the siege on Gaza. Under Biden's tenure, the administration continues to supply Israel with total international immunity.

This concludes the historical survey of AIPAC's and the wider lobby's relationship with the executive and legislative powers in the USA. Notwithstanding the fluctuations in the relationship between the lobby and various administrations, its basic aims since its inception have been fully achieved. However critical any particular administration was towards Israel, it did not undermine the huge financial and military aid to Israel, nor did it stop the continuous automatic American support for Israel in the international arena in general and in the UN in particular. Moreover, at the time of writing, AIPAC, within the wider lobby, still dominates the Capitol and can make or break any legislation that concerns Israel.

In fact, as Grant Smith has illustrated in his incisive book, *The Israeli Lobby Enters State Government: Rise of the Virginia Israel Advisory Board*, the lobby's presence in the past and in the present stretches way beyond the federal powerbases into the states themselves. He shows how a local lobby in Virginia was able to procure concrete financial support for Israel through influencing the state's government. He revealed the activities of a pro-Israel agency within the local government in Virginia, using businesses such as tobacco and gambling, and an intricate network meant to avoid tax issues and legal restrictions on advocacy, in order to influence American policy towards Israel. Exclusive contracts with Israel in the state of Virginia, in Smith's view, come at the expense of the local economy and local taxpayers pay the price. These agencies in state government also provide a powerful base for influencing the foreign policy of the USA, through their own lobbies on Capitol Hill.¹⁵⁵

Moving successfully through the financial, economic and political corridors of power did not necessarily mean that public opinion at large, and sections of civil society in particular, were also swaying in AIPAC's direction. Ever since the beginning of this century, winning over society, as distinct from its political elites and even the mainstream media, was far more challenging for AIPAC, since money and political influence counted less here. In fact, since 2001 AIPAC has found itself at war with many

sections of American civil society. This was a battle already being waged during the time of the Bush Jr, Obama, Trump and Biden administrations. The 'battle cry', so to speak, came from Israel, which recruited not only AIPAC but also a host of American Jewish organisations into a campaign meant to silence criticism against Israel in civil society and suppress any attempt to go beyond verbal condemnation into proactive operations such as boycott and divestment. So, allow me to go back to the moment the campaign was born and follow its progression to the present day.

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The War Against American Civil Society

From 2001, Israeli policy makers noted a systemic change in attitudes towards Israel on both sides of the Atlantic. The traditional tools of advocacy and lobbying that were very effective in dealing with political elites and mainstream media or academia seemed less effective here.

The project of changing people's hearts and minds about Israel was assessed as an issue pertaining directly to Israel's national security, too important to be left in the hands of the pro-Israel lobby in the US. This would be directed from Israel.

The strategy was twofold. The first strategy was to rebrand Israel as the only progressive democracy in the twenty-first-century Middle East. The second was to respond to more assertive criticism of Israel in civil society with the traditional methods of intimidation: smearing and character assassination. Any strong words of criticism would be decried as 'delegitimation of the Jewish state'. Of course, the second prong of the strategy made it harder for keen-eyed observers to believe in the narrative of the first one. But Israeli policy makers embraced this rebranding exercise in spectacular fashion.

A poster of an almost naked Miss Israel, the famous Superwoman Gal Gadot, and a poster of four fit young men, equally underdressed, were the face of Israel in 2007 in a campaign named Brand Israel commissioned by the Prime Minister's Office, the Foreign and Tourist Ministries and the

Jewish Agency. This former Miss Israel was meant to convince young heterosexual American men of the rebranding of the Jewish state as a haven for young people, while the attractive men represented the Israeli LGBT community, advertising Tel Aviv as the gay capital of Israel. One wonders how Theodor Herzl or even David Ben-Gurion and Menachem Begin would have regarded this representation of Zionism as a soft pornographic dream. But everything in the struggle to dispel the negative image of Israel was deemed appropriate in what the policy makers saw as an existential matter. The local team working for the Israelis explained that such posters:

allowed us to gear our message to the younger generation, especially males, and towards a demographic that did not see Israel as relevant or identify particularly with Israel.¹

But in fact, the campaign targeted all walks of life with images and texts tailored to each group and its inclinations and preferences. Israel's image abroad was now commodified as a consumer product.

It began in the summer of 2005 when the Israeli Foreign Ministry, the Prime Minister's Office and the Finance Ministry concluded three years of consultation with American marketing executives and launched Brand Israel: a campaign to 'rebrand' the country's image to appear 'relevant and modern' instead of militaristic and religious. Huge sums of money were allocated for marketing the new image abroad in order to combat what the political and academic elite in Israel considered a global campaign to delegitimise the Jewish state. This was to be a gigantic effort and the team appointed to see it through was accordingly dubbed BIG (the Brand Israel Group).²

Freshly created front organisations were asked to disseminate this new version of Israel as a dream come true, emphasising beauty, fun and technological achievements. One such outfit was the David Project in America, which became very active in speaking for the campaign. One of its many actions was to try and counter the constant characterisation of Israel as one of the most hated states in the world (together with Iran and North Korea).³ The David Project found that Israel was not among the first twenty-five states where people liked to belong. The project's purpose was

to convince everyone that Israel was one of the happiest places on earth due to its technological achievements and supposedly high standards of living.

It was felt by the Brand Israel team that the country's history was also an asset that would help to sell Israel in the twenty-first century:

In terms of heritage benchmarks, Israel is home to fundamental religious and historical landmarks, including the Western Wall, Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Al Aqsa Mosque, and the Baha'i Temple in Haifa. Israelis boast a high quality of life, and the country's democratic values focus on inclusion and political representation of all its citizens, including women and religious and racial minorities.⁴

The David Project came up with its own explanation for the discrepancy between what the state had to offer and its negative global image:

We know misperceptions of Israel are rampant in the media; ordinary citizens across the globe see Israel cast as yet another violent nation in a region steeped in unrest and war. Conversations taking place in print, on television, and in the blogosphere often regard the Arab-Israeli conflict as both all-consuming and myopic; the diversity and excitement of Israeli society is often subsumed by twenty-second sound bites focusing on only one aspect of the Israeli story.⁵

And it identified the following challenges for the Brand Israel team:

How do we change perceptions? How do we introduce nuance into global conversations surrounding Israel? How do we discuss the highlights and achievements of Israeli society, while also recognizing its weaknesses and shortcomings? What needs to happen to remove Israel from the bright spotlight of a violent conflict?⁶

The answer to these challenges was provided on the official website of the Israeli Foreign Ministry. The recommendation was to abandon aiming to win the argument with facts, information or moral points of view. These were dispensed with for the sake of a new idea that captivated the imagination of the Foreign Ministry: the need to brand Israel and market it like a product. Gideon Meir of Israel's Foreign Ministry told *Haaretz* that he would 'rather have a Style section item on Israel than a front-page story'.⁷

What this meant in practice was that any PR campaign for Israel had to try and avoid any association with the conflict or the Palestinian issue. This was the spirit of the guidelines given to yet another front organisation that

was founded to cater particularly to the younger Jewish generation in the USA. It was called ISRAEL21c, and had been founded in 2001 with the mission of redefining ‘the conversation about Israel [in the USA]’ by showing ‘how Israeli efforts have contributed incalculably to the advancement of healthcare, the environment, technology, culture, and global democratic values worldwide’.⁸

We can assume that the idea was to move the conversation away from the elephant in the room: the Israeli occupation. Like *Fawlty Towers*’ most famous episode where the hotel owner is trying not to mention the Second World War whenever he has German guests, the message to activists was that mentioning the war (that is, the Palestinians) was not a good idea. This was articulated more explicitly by a PR expert recruited by Brand Israel who explained to the *Jewish Week* that it would be quite futile to argue about the Palestine issue:

Proving that Israel is right, and the Palestinians are wrong may be emotionally satisfying for advocates, but not necessarily effective in changing people’s way of thinking about Israel.⁹

And he added:

You have a narrow bandwidth, where Israel can only win some of the argument. We are trying to broaden the bandwidth to include Israel’s accomplishments.

Soon after, the work of the various organisations and individuals was put under one roof. This was an operative decision taken by the Foreign Ministry’s first ever Brand Israel Conference, convened in Tel Aviv, which marked the official adoption of the campaign. Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni appointed Ido Aharoni to head Israel’s first brand management office and awarded him a \$4 million budget, in addition to the already established \$3 million annual expenditure on *Hasbara* and \$11 million for the Israeli Tourism Ministry in North America. Smaller budgets, but by no means insignificant, were distributed for work in Europe. The impact of American public opinion is indicated by Israeli politicians’ focus on the US – they sensed that ‘delegitimisation’ had been particularly successful there. One would have thought, given how much money had been poured into it, that

the US would serve as a safe bastion of pro-Israel bias for many decades to come. But the US was not the sole target; academics would try and convince Israeli politicians that the plague of ‘delegitimation’ was rampant in the United Kingdom as well, as we shall see later.¹⁰

Aharoni recruited top people from the world of marketing and advertising. These included the Saatchi brothers (reported to be doing the job for free) and PR experts such as David Saranga, who told *PR Week* that the two groups Israel was targeting were ‘liberals’, and people aged sixteen to thirty (hence Miss Israel and the men in swimwear on the posters). In 2005 Aharoni’s office hired TNS, a market research firm, to test new brand concepts for Israel in thirteen different countries. They also funded a pilot programme called ‘Israel: Innovation for Life’.¹¹

At the centre of the team were people who run the Brand Asset Valuator (BAV), the world’s largest brand database, working alongside top publicists and marketing people. BAV specialises in exposing the target community’s emotional attachments to brands. Fern Oppenheim, an advertising and marketing consultant and member of the Brand Israel Group, said the BAV data would serve a long-term, co-ordinated strategy that included ongoing research and evaluation: ‘We want to be a resource everyone can benefit from’, she said, ‘the way a corporate management team would manage a brand’.¹²

The experts told the diplomats that Israel had failed to be liked in the past because:

Americans know a lot about Israel, just not the right things. They think of Israel as a grim, war-torn country, not one booming with high-tech and busy outdoor cafes.¹³

Hence, in 2005 the mission was to sell Israel as a quasi-American society. This task was handed to Young & Rubicam, leading market experts in the US. One of their managers, David Sable, explained that they were about to assist in refashioning Israel as the reincarnation of a new USA, because ‘Americans don’t see Israel as being like the US.’¹⁴ Israel, as a brand, was already strong in America, he conceded, but the trouble was that ‘it is better known than liked, and constrained by lack of relevance’. Sable elaborated:

Americans find Israel to be totally irrelevant to their lives and they are tuning out ... particularly 18–34-year-old males, the most significant target.¹⁵

Brand Israel intended to change this by selecting aspects of Israeli society to highlight that would bring Americans directly to them. They started off by offering free trips for architectural writers, and then for food and wine writers. The goal of these efforts ‘was to convey an image of Israel as a productive, vibrant and cutting-edge culture’.¹⁶

By 2010, the charm offensive was preparing blueprints for the future. One of these was succinctly summarised by Gary Rosenblatt from the *Jewish Week*:

Think of Israel as a product undergoing an overhaul to make it more competitive in the marketplace. What’s called for are fewer stories explaining the rationale for the security fence, and more attention to scientists doing stem-cell research on the cutting edge or the young computer experts who gave the world Instant Messaging.¹⁷

A few years into the programme, the Israeli consul general in New York proudly reported a ‘paradigm shift’ in America. Before Brand Israel, the American public, for some unfathomable reason, had been unaware that Israel was a democratic, moral and successful state. Now they knew.

It was not only American PR and branding wizards that were recruited. The Israeli government also asked for the public to be more deeply involved. In a show of total mistrust in its professional diplomats, it recruited commercial television in Israel to seek alternative messengers for the rebranded Israel through a reality show called *The Ambassadors*. The winner of a thirteen-week elimination contest won a job with a Zionist advocacy group called Israel at Heart to supplement its diplomats with the best of Israel’s youth. One such group were Ethiopian Jews from Israel, brought by Israel at Heart to speak in African American churches. Imagine bringing African Americans from Harlem to tell people in Brixton about the American dream and you may understand the absurdity of such a move.¹⁸ They were replaced later by more professional selections of high school student cadres for the mission.

Moreover, the Foreign Ministry asked every Israeli performing artist to include a component of Brand Israel in their shows. A typical example of

such a show was the tour undertaken in 2012 in the US and the UK by the dance company Batsheva; the tour was openly described by the Israeli Foreign Ministry as part of a new Brand Israel campaign. They were ‘the best global ambassadors of Israel’, the Ministry said.¹⁹

By 2010, the Israeli economic weekly, *Globes*, reported that the Foreign Ministry had allocated one hundred million shekels (over \$26,260,000) to branding for the coming years. This money was mainly destined to help fight the growing ‘delegitimisation’ on online social networks. The Foreign Ministry was very optimistic about the chances of such a campaign. Its research unit ‘found out’ that social media users ‘show sympathy and identity with content that interests them, regardless of the identity or the political affiliation of the publisher.’²⁰

An early success had already been reported that year. Scott Piro, a gay Jewish public relations/social media professional, announced in a press release that Israel’s Ministry of Tourism, the Tel Aviv Tourism Board and Israel’s largest LGBT organisation, the Agudah, were joining together to launch Tel Aviv ‘Gay Vibe’, an online tourism campaign to promote Tel Aviv as a travel destination for LGBT Europeans. Critical observers called this initiative ‘pinkwashing’, comparing the invocation of women’s rights in the nineteenth century to justify colonisation with the cynical deployment of gay rights as a tool to legitimise the continued oppression of Palestinians.

²¹

Nevertheless, even the publicists didn’t believe in their own reports of success. A new body was asked to join to find out why success was still elusive and what else could be done. This was the Jewish Agency’s Reut Institute (*reut* meaning ‘visibility’ as well as ‘friendship’ in Hebrew). The institute claimed in 2010 that the threat to the state of Israel in the diplomatic and international area was increasing. They had good cause for concern. The UN was ready to publish a ground-breaking report about the Israeli occupation – and no amount of charm could salvage Brand Israel from its conclusions.²²

Israel changed tack and went on the offensive. The report was analysed by the Reut Institute as a document that ‘questions the right of Israel to

exist’, connecting it to the international outcry directed at Israel after its second attack on Lebanon in 2006. The international furore, according to this institute, was the product of a radical Islamist ideology originating in Iran, from which a web of ‘delegitimisation’ was spun with the help of Hezbollah and Hamas.

The problem, the Reut Institute suggested, was a ‘conceptual inferiority’ on the part of the ideological forces in Israel. Israel failed in marketing itself as a Jewish and democratic state and hence the vicious delegitimisation campaign was so successful.

If this campaign continued, the Reut Institute warned that Israel would become a pariah state and there would be no solution for the Palestinian question, hence necessitating a one-state solution. When Zionist bodies warn against the danger of a one-state solution, they are not thinking of a state in which every citizen, be they Jewish or Palestinian, has equal rights. As Prime Minister Ehud Olmert articulated it in 2007:

If the day comes when the two-state solution collapses, and we face a South African-style struggle for equal voting rights (with Palestinians) ... then, as soon as that happens, the state of Israel is finished.²³

The Reut Institute report reaffirmed this perspective: ‘A formative event in such an eventuality [the making of an apartheid state] is the collapse of the two-state solution.’ But it seems that even the two-state solution wouldn’t satisfy them – unless Israel was spared from any criticism at all:

However, even in the event of an acceptable two-state solution, the de-legitimisation will continue, and would be focused probably on Israel’s treatment of the Palestinian minority in its midst.²⁴

So, what was to be done? ‘It takes a network to fight a network’, concluded the report, asking the government to gather the necessary forces to win the battle against delegitimisation through the internet. This would be assisted by the founding of new NGOs, but more importantly than anything else, the report declared that it was necessary ‘to re-brand Israel. Currently Israel is branded as a violent and serial violator of international law’.²⁵

So, at least according to the Reut Institute, all the money and experts in the world had not yet helped to rebrand Israel as a peaceful and attractive nation. The obvious solution of being less violent towards the Palestinians seems to have passed them by entirely. Instead, the Jewish Agency wanted the government to seek ways of pressuring the Western elites to broadcast a different image of Israel, and still hoped that Jewish communities abroad could deliver the goods.

Another outfit of the Jewish Agency was the Jewish People Policy Institute. It declared in 2010 that it was tasked with facing one of the greatest threats to Israel's national security and ergo to Jews as a whole: 'de-legitimization has to be understood not only as a threat to Israel but to particular Jewish existence everywhere'.²⁶ Although it consisted of demographers, historians, sociologists and propagandists, it behaved like a military unit in this context. In a similar way, its annual 'State of the Nation' conference at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya called Israel's marketing campaign 'a war', but not just a war – it was 'asymmetric warfare in the battle of ideas'. Since Israel could not be defeated militarily and economically, its enemies were trying to destroy it through ideas. It was an imbalanced conflict, because the enemy was all over the world, and very powerful, at least according to Israel.²⁷

The Reut Institute saw the assimilation of young Jewish people into Gentile communities as part and parcel of delegitimation – young Jews were 'distancing themselves from Israel'. This was reaffirmed by a famous article by Peter Beinart in the *New York Review of Books* in 2010, but Beinart suggested that the growing gulf between young Jews and the American Jewish establishment emerged from the desire not to be identified with the occupation and the criminal policies of the state.²⁸

The Jewish Agency obviously did not accept such a perspective. In their eyes, the disaffection stemmed from the popularity of Reform Judaism in the US – a branch of the faith that was accorded little respect in Israel and whose conversion of newcomers to the Jewish faith was not recognised by the Rabbinical institutions in Israel. Consequently, in 2011, while the Reut Institute was asking for more aggressive lobbying, it wanted to put forward

a vision of a more religiously pluralist Israel, to win round young, liberally minded American Jews.

But more forces were needed to recover from the ‘conceptual inferiority’ the Reut Institute had identified – they wanted to invent a scholarly scaffolding to justify Israel’s behaviour. The ivory tower had to be put to work.

Until 2010, Zionist scholars had been busy struggling against post-Zionist criticism from within Israeli academia, which had once been prominent in the 1990s. But now scholarly knowledge was to be enlisted not only against the enemies from within, but also against those in the USA and Britain. The new campaign was led by the national religious university of Bar-Ilan and was soon joined by the University of Tel Aviv.

The main role of Israeli academia was to explain why Israel was still being delegitimised in 2010. Answers varied according to the academics’ fields of expertise. One key group was those specialising in the history of anti-Semitism and Jewish Studies. They crafted a narrative that was intended to provide a diagnosis of the problem and a prescription to treat it.

This concentrated scholarly effort was meant to provide an intellectual framework connecting contemporary anti-Israel opinion with historical European anti-Semitism. This narrative was first articulated in response to the September 2001 World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa. This UN-sponsored NGO meeting was convened to discuss racism throughout the world, including Palestine. It was depicted by the Israeli government as the formal launch of the sinister delegitimation campaign against Israel, as Arab delegates sought to pass a declaration describing Israel as a racist apartheid state. The fact that proceedings concluded three days before 9/11 did not escape the Brand Israel team and the two events were directly linked as two aspects of the same assault against the free world.

This connection between 9/11 and the ‘delegitimation campaign’ was made very openly by Benjamin Netanyahu on various occasions. During a speech in the Knesset on 23 June 2011, he talked about an unholy alliance between radical Islam and the radical Left in the West, joining forces

against the free democratic world, which Israel symbolised more than any other place on the globe. From that moment onwards, any international rulings against Israel (such the one issued by the International Court of Justice in The Hague against the apartheid wall) and any actions by civil and human rights organisations (such as the international flotilla that attempted to reach the besieged Gaza) were all stages in the well-structured plan devised in Durban.

A different perspective was provided by a group of ex-generals and previous heads of security services working in academia or in semi-academic institutes that served both the universities and the intelligence community. One such outfit was the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center in Tel Aviv, which identified the same web of enemies as everyone before and after it: radical Islam working together with leftist anti-Zionists and right-wing anti-Semites.

The Israeli deputy foreign minister, Dani Ayalon, affirmed this interpretation of the problem in a speech he gave to the Jewish Agency in October 2010: ‘Our enemies recruit agents who work under the pretence of human rights activism to delegitimise Israel.’²⁹ This was broadcast as an official Israeli declaration worldwide. In a speech in front of 150 legal experts who were invited to the Israeli Foreign Ministry, he echoed the Jewish Agency’s position: ‘Terrorists and their emissaries are distorting the international law in order to rob democracies [such as Israel] the right to defend itself.’ And he added, ‘This is a threat to peace for the whole world’.³⁰ In the Knesset he called for:

A counter web made of Jewish and non-Jewish NGOs and academic institutions that would join forces in the front against the delegitimation and describe the reality in the world as it really is.³¹

By 2011, the government had already invested millions in creating centres for Israeli Studies in various universities around the world, sending high school graduates – selecting the most handsome and articulate among them – to market a youthful, Western Israel. Special teams of tweeters, Facebookers and bloggers began to work 24/7, responding to anything that

sounded remotely anti-Israel, while lobbies, modelled on AIPAC in the USA, were founded in Europe as well.

The whole campaign was conducted with military precision. General Dangot, the co-ordinator of Israeli policy in the occupied territories, spelled this out when he said, in specific reference to Hamas:

The war on legitimisation and public opinion is not easier than that fought in the battlefield ... there is a culture of lies, distortion and fabrication.³²

It was the Harold Hartog School of Government and Policy at Tel Aviv University that commissioned the most comprehensive analysis of the issue at hand. In 2010, it produced a ninety-page policy paper on this topic. The policy paper, and luminaries such as Alan Dershowitz, a frequent visitor to Tel Aviv University, were somewhat at a loss as to what countermeasures to offer that not already been tried before. The policy paper's author, Rommey Hassman, proposed an interdisciplinary tool that integrated strategic management, marketing and branding approaches with diplomatic and ideological doctrines and, added to the mix, an old Jewish notion called *tikkun olam* which posited the ethical and moral responsibility of the Jewish people to the world.³³ It assumed that the state of Israel could improve its image by emphasising the work it was doing in the field of humanitarian assistance and development, while, at the same time, strengthening its contribution to the developing world. He concluded: 'It is my hope that this publication will be helpful to academics and policymakers alike'.³⁴

This paper recommended that the government of Israel market the nation through the following three steps:

1. Establish a national communications council: this council would be established in the framework of the Prime Minister's Office, and would be headed by the government's chief spokesperson. It would administer and oversee a network of government spokespersons, co-ordinating their stand on policy, security, and economic and social issues.

2. Market the nation: To do this, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would function as the international marketing arm of the State of Israel. In this capacity, it would co-ordinate the marketing of Israel, supervising international press secretaries and spokespersons, contact with foreign journalists and media, and monitoring the international media. The Ministry

would also be responsible for all of Israel's embassies, consulates, missions and representatives throughout the world.

3. Establish a Communications Division within the Israel Defence Forces (IDF): This unit would co-ordinate an expanded IDF Spokesperson's Bureau, any units in the military dealing with research and consciousness design, the network of soldier spokespersons, and Israel Army Radio (*Galei Zahal*). In working with the foreign media, the IDF Spokesperson's Bureau would function as an implementing body, acting on the recommendations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and under the guidance of the national communications council.

Since it was not possible to address all target markets simultaneously, priorities would have to be set. This paper prioritised marketing by country, based on a measure of the strength of the relationship between each country and the state of Israel.³⁵

As is typical for Israel, structured strategic thinking was overtaken by domestic politics. Parts of the document quoted above were implemented, not as part of a clear strategy, but more as a makeshift policy here and there. A more structural and strategic effort in the 'war for legitimisation' was decided upon as a result of negotiations in the process of forming a coalition government. This is how the Israeli Ministry for Strategic Affairs was born and entrusted with the mission of forcing world public opinion to become unambiguously pro-Israel again.

The Ministry for Strategic Affairs grew out of various Israeli coalition governments' domestic considerations. Many ministries are invented to provide a ministry to heads of parties as an inducement to join a coalition government, and this ministry's origin story is no different.

In 2006, Avigdor Lieberman, the head of the hard-right party Yisrael Beiteinu, was courted by Ehud Olmert. Lieberman wanted the Home Security office, but he was ineligible on account of being under investigation for corruption, so they created a new ministry for him, the Ministry for Strategic Affairs. The office was disbanded in 2008. In 2009, the second Netanyahu government (2009–2013) resurrected the ministry and appointed Moshe Ya'alon, the former Chief of the General Staff. He declared that the office would be focusing on countering 'Palestinian incitement'. In 2014, the ministry was merged with the intelligence

ministry, only to reappear once more as an independent ministry in 2015. By this point it had a real job on its hands.

In 2015, the ministry was instructed by the government to focus on what was seen as the spearhead of the global campaign to delegitimise Israel, that is, the BDS movement, which by that time could boast impressive achievements in recruiting academic, cultural and trade union institutions to its campaign. These successes meant that BDS began to attract the attention of the Israeli government and the lobby in the US in 2015, when a decade of its activity had started to affect public opinion in the US and in Britain.

In response, the budget of the Ministry of Strategic Affairs was increased, the extra funding coming from a special budget determined by Benjamin Netanyahu; the source of the money remains opaque. A task force called Ha-Maracha ('the campaign') was set up to undertake the battle, and to provide assistance to the lobby abroad in turning the tide.³⁶

THE LOBBY AGAINST *THE LOBBY*: UNCOVERING THE ADVOCACY NETWORK FROM WITHIN

In this particular campaign, AIPAC was entrusted with targeting media outlets that Israel typically neglected; for instance, Al Jazeera. More specifically, the lobby was called to the battlefield after the network aired an investigative documentary called *The Lobby*. Although the first instalment was successfully broadcast in Britain, the second series, relating to the actions of the US lobby, could not be aired at all.

AIPAC successfully censored it, and it can now only be watched on YouTube.³⁷ In its actions, AIPAC revealed how much it could control the right to freedom of speech in the US. What was AIPAC so keen to cover up? Al Jazeera's reporter, James Anthony Kleinfeld, succeeded in posing as an enthusiastic supporter of Israel and was embraced by several pro-Israel advocacy organisations during the Obama and Trump eras. He was invited by outfits such as StandWithUs, the Brandeis Center, the Israel Project, the

Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Israel on Campus Coalition, the Zionist Organization of America, Fuel for Truth and the Canary Mission.

Let's take a look at what these organisations are up to – all of them are still active today – beginning with StandWithUs (SWU), also known as Israel Emergency Alliance. Roz Rothstein, a family therapist from Los Angeles, founded it in 2001. It gained visibility around the time of Trump's election in 2016, with eighteen full-time officers in the US and branches elsewhere. According to recent research on the group, SWU regards the West Bank as part of Israel and supports the legitimisation of the illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank. On their website they devote much space to the West Bank and call it the West Bank/Judea and Samaria. They suggest that the argument that the West Bank belongs to Israel and should be called Judea and Samaria is as morally and legally valid as the other point of view (i.e. that it is illegally occupied territory). We might see this as akin to stating that both opposition to apartheid in South Africa and support for the regime were morally and legally valid.³⁸

SWU works in various areas. They are active on American campuses, where they imitate the work of an NGO in Israel called Im Tirtzu, a government-backed outfit whose main role is to monitor lecturers in Israeli universities in case they are conveying anti-Zionist messages in their lectures and classes. SWU has a similar army of foot soldiers carrying out similar missions. They are more systematic than their Israeli counterpart, and you can graduate with a diploma as a 'fellow' or 'ambassador' in many of its induction programmes for pro-Israel activism.³⁹ On campuses across the US, SWU tried to prevent students and faculty members from supporting the BDS movement. The various Netanyahu governments were very fond of Roz Rothstein, and the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs helped fund SWU operations in the USA. Rothstein was lauded by the right-wing *Jerusalem Post* as one of the fifty most influential Jewish women in the world in 2016. In 2008, with the help of the *Jerusalem Post*, SWU started to publish the *Campus Post*, a monthly newspaper that included articles by *Jerusalem Post* writers on the topics of Israeli news, society and culture, while students and others in North America contributed

articles about pro-Israel activism. However, this particular publication was short-lived.

SWU is also highly litigious: it has a legal section employing eighty lawyers, who weaponise legal procedures against BDS resolutions and pro-Palestinian activists on campus. It often wins – but on occasion it can be defeated. One of its most high-profile losses in the courts was its campaign against the Olympia Food Co-op in the state of Washington. This showdown, alongside two others involving Fordham University and the company Caterpillar, is useful in illustrating the extent of the lobby's legal capacity, and how unrelentingly it seeks to shut down any attempts to express solidarity with Palestine.

The Olympia Food Co-op began as a small store in downtown Olympia, Washington, in 1977. It was part of a network of food buying clubs that began to spring up in the area, and it focused on recycled materials when building its first shop and future branches. The Co-op is run by a board of directors. In 2010, they decided to institute a boycott of Israeli goods. Five of the Co-op members, aided by SWU, sued their colleagues, alleging that the board had acted beyond the scope of its authority and had breached its fiduciary duties. SWU initially took credit for filing the case, stating that it was a by-product of the partnership between SWU and the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In various decisions by a local court and an appeal court in a process that lasted for eight years, the lawsuit was ruled as illegal. SWU ended up being ambiguous about its involvement in the case, and withdrew from the campaign, perhaps as it was uncomfortable with failure.⁴⁰

On the face of it, the Fordham University case was no different – but this time SWU managed to win. In 2016, Fordham University, in New York City, declined an application from the group Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) to be recognised as an official student group, claiming that its goals ran 'contrary to the mission and values of the university'. The SJP students filed a lawsuit which was successful in a lower New York court, arguing that Fordham was in breach of their own policies and regulations, which is forbidden in New York civil law under Article 78. The university

filed an appeal in the Supreme Court of New York Appellate Division. In 2020, SWU filed an amicus brief in support of Fordham University's position. SWU founder Roz Rothstein said that Fordham is one of the first universities to 'recognise SJP's bigotry for what it is'. In the brief, SWU argued that the courts had limited jurisdiction in terms of dictating the decisions of private universities. Additionally, SWU argued that the university's decision was consistent with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which legislates that no person may be subject to discrimination on basis of race, colour or national origin under programmes receiving federal financial assistance. The New York State Appellate Division ruled in Fordham's favour and overturned the earlier ruling. By May 2021, the New York Court of Appeals denied the students' motion to appeal, ending the four-year-old legal case.⁴¹

Between the failure in Olympia and the success in Fordham, there were some inconclusive cases, such as the struggle to 'save' Caterpillar – the world's largest construction equipment manufacturer – from the 'claws' of the BDS movement. Its flagship yellow bulldozer, the D9, has become the symbol of one of the most horrifying methods used by the Israeli occupation – the demolition of Palestinian homes. The Dubbi, or Teddy Bear (D9R), was the new and improved iteration, now protected from stones thrown by desperate victims. A Caterpillar D9R driver killed the American activist Rachel Corrie in Gaza in March 2003.

In 2005, the pro-Palestinian group Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) introduced a resolution at a Caterpillar shareholder meeting. Among the Jewish activists, this group stands out as a grassroots organisation endorsing the BDS movement and lending its support to representatives such as Ilhan Omar, who, as we saw, have faced allegations of anti-Semitism from AIPAC.⁴² It partnered in this action with four Roman Catholic orders of nuns. They called upon the company to investigate whether Israel used bulldozers to destroy Palestinian homes. JVP claimed that such usage violated the company's code of business conduct. SWU reacted by urging its members to buy Caterpillar stocks and to write letters of support to the company. It sent its representatives to shareholders, trying to persuade them

that Caterpillar had been unfairly singled out. Ever since that meeting, members of the Palestine solidarity movement demonstrate, and attend the shareholders' meeting to introduce the topic again and again, while the D9s continue to demolish Palestinian houses to this day (as this book was being written, we saw these being used in the Jenin refugee camps in July 2023).⁴³

The SWU also produced information kits that played fast and loose with factual accuracy. As Ian Lustick has shown, they rehashed some of the false claims and statistics of age-old Israeli propaganda, the most important of which was the claim that a substantial Jewish majority could be sustained even if Israel annexed the West Bank.⁴⁴

Like many of these lobbying organisations, SWU had an office in Israel. We might wonder why – it had no operational purpose in Israel. The reason was financial; this office provided a legal basis for the Israeli funding for SWU. Another purpose was recruitment. In 2009, nearly fifteen per cent of the group's budget went to the Israeli office, which trains 150 Israeli students each year, in conjunction with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to develop their advocacy skills. In January 2015, the investigative Israeli website the *Seventh Eye* reported that SWU would receive \$254,000 from the Prime Minister's Office to set up a 'Social Media Ambassadors' programme to educate young people on how to use social media to promote Israel. However, according to SWU, the project did not materialise (SWU did not disclose where the money went instead).⁴⁵

SWU is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to modern lobbying fronts. Another outfit investigated by *The Lobby* was the Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law. This establishment was made necessary by obvious and blatant Israeli violations of international law that no charm offensive could reframe. To foil further undermining of Israel's legitimacy from this angle, the lobby needed to perform a discursive sleight of hand. A centre called the 'centre for human rights law' would be a disaster, as Israel violates these laws daily. But the untrained eye would not see the difference between human rights under law, i.e. domestic Israeli law, and international human rights law.

The purpose of this centre, established in 2012, was to portray Israel as a victim of human rights abuses. The trick was to frame any action against Israel as one against the Jewish people as whole, and hence anti-Semitic. In practice, their brief was to recruit Jewish law students to do more or less what the StandWithUs students were asked to do. ‘Chapters’ were created in many universities, seeking to detect BDS initiatives and generally what would be deemed as anti-Israel activity on campus.⁴⁶ Like StandWithUs, students were not just activists, but rather part of initiative with the catchy name of JIGSAW – JIGSAW stands for ‘Justice Initiative Guiding Student Activists Worldwide’. The ‘world’ here means the US, like the World Series in American baseball.⁴⁷

Its principal nemesis was the Middle East Studies Association (MESA). MESA was founded in 1965 and is a scholarly association of academics teaching and studying the Middle East. Most of the Middle Eastern departments of the world’s universities are associated with MESA. In 2014, the Brandeis Center produced a report called *The Morass of Middle East Studies* that accused federally funded Middle East Studies departments at various colleges and universities of being biased against Israel. The organisation claimed that federal funds, provided to 129 international studies and foreign language centres at universities by Title VI of the Higher Education Act of 1965, had been abused and misused.⁴⁸

The report was accompanied by a statement signed by ten pro-Israel groups, expressing concern over alleged misuse of taxpayer money, and arguing that the programmes ‘disseminate anti-American and anti-Israel falsehoods’. The statement also called for changes to Title VI which should ‘require recipients of Title VI funds to establish grievance procedures to address complaints that programs are not reflecting diverse perspectives and a wide range of views’ and ‘require the US Department of Education to establish a formal complaint-resolution process similar to that in use to enforce Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.’⁴⁹

Highly professional and internationally acclaimed work on the Middle East by American scholars exposed the origins, mechanisms and targets of Israel’s systematic abuse of civil rights. This academic work, which

unearthed human rights violations, was accused by the Brandeis Center of being the real breach of civil rights. In this campaign, the Center worked together with another outfit called AMCHA ('Your People' in Hebrew); its full name is the AMCHA Initiative. It is a campus group that sees itself as an anti-Semitism watchdog, but in practice it only contends with BDS initiatives on campuses. It was founded in 2012 by a lecturer from UC Santa Cruz, Tammi Rossman-Benjamin, and an emeritus professor from UCLA, Leila Beckwith. It is a small outfit compared to others in terms of its finances. But it doesn't need much. Like the Canary Mission, of which more will be said later, it is busy identifying the 'anti-Israeli' lecturers on campuses. It is a very local enterprise, mainly targeting the pro-Palestine and Palestinian groups on the US West Coast by equating anti-Semitism with anti-Zionism or even mild criticism of Israel. Its main claim to fame was the cancellation of a Zoom meeting with Leila Khaled in 2020, after it placed Zoom under intense pressure. Leila Khaled became famous as a member of a team that hijacked a Trans World Airlines flight in 1969 between Rome and Tel Aviv and landed it in Damascus. A photo of her holding an AK-47 became as iconic as that of Che Guevara smoking a cigar.⁵⁰

Liberal Zionists seemed to be quite appalled by AMCHA's activities. In October 2014, a group of Jewish professors wrote to the *Forward*:

[AMCHA's] technique of monitoring lectures, symposia and conferences strains the basic principle of academic freedom on which the American university is built ... Moreover, its definition of anti-Semitism is so indiscriminating as to be meaningless. Instead of encouraging openness through its efforts, AMCHA's approach closes off all but the most narrow intellectual directions and has a chilling effect on research and teaching. AMCHA's methods lend little support to Israel, whose very survival depends on free, open, and vigorous debate about its future ... AMCHA's tactics are designed to stifle debate on issues debated in Israel and around the world, and the presumption that students must be protected from their own universities is misguided and destructive. Efforts such as these do not promote academic integrity, but rather serve to deaden the kind of spirited academic exchange that is the lifeblood of the university.⁵¹

The Brandeis Center mirrored the methods outlined above, but on a grander scale. As part of its activity, it targeted a student organisation at Harvard

University that protested against the presence of SodaStream water machines on the campus. SodaStream is one of the biggest producers of soda worldwide, and has been owned by PepsiCo since 2018. Before 2015, its principal manufacturing site was in the occupied West Bank – but after a long BDS campaign, it agreed to move inside Israeli borders.

The Brandeis Center had their hands full as BDS gained momentum. One professional scholarly association after the other seriously considered boycotting Israeli academia. Brandeis was involved in trying to stop such initiatives by the Modern Language Association and the American Studies Association. Their most recent campaign was against Ben & Jerry's. In 2022, the company announced that it would not sell its ice cream in the occupied West Bank. It was difficult to find any substantial counterargument made by the Brandeis Center to the very carefully worded Ben & Jerry's announcement that also affirmed its commitment to continuing to sell in Israel proper. It shows how disconnected the current pro-Israel bodies in the USA are from the reality on the ground when they attack companies that abide by international law:

We believe it is inconsistent with our values for Ben & Jerry's ice cream to be sold in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). We also hear and recognize the concerns shared with us by our fans and trusted partners.

We have a longstanding partnership with our licensee, who manufactures Ben & Jerry's ice cream in Israel and distributes it in the region. We have been working to change this, and so we have informed our licensee that we will not renew the license agreement when it expires at the end of next year.

Although Ben & Jerry's will no longer be sold in the OPT, we will stay in Israel through a different arrangement. We will share an update on this as soon as we're ready.⁵²

And on the Hill, the Brandeis Center joined other organisations in trying to promote legislation that aimed to equate anti-Semitism with criticism of Israel, as the best means of arresting changes in American civil society's attitude towards Israel. It supported the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act, a controversial piece of legislation introduced to the US Congress in 2016 which required the Department of Education to use its definition of anti-Semitism when 'reviewing, investigating, or deciding whether there has been a violation of title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964'. The definition

stated that anti-Semitism is ‘a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred towards the Jews’. As Joe Cohn commented at the time on the Fire website, this is ‘a description so broad that it allows for the investigation and punishment of core political speech, such as criticism on Israeli policy’.⁵³

Less clandestine are the lobby’s efforts on American campuses. Donations are deployed to build centres for Israel Studies to provide a veneer of scholarly legitimacy to Israel’s nation-building project. At the same time, the lobby uses litigation in an attempt to defund programmes for Middle East Studies which are insufficiently pro-Israel.⁵⁴

Other US lobbying organisations did not seek simply to change the mood of America-based corporations and campuses but to create a global shift in opinion in favour of Israel. One such outfit is the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. Its establishment was a knee-jerk neo-con reaction to 9/11, but one that from the very beginning worked in tandem with Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It began with advocating, in keeping with its tough neo-con image, sanctions and aggressive policies against North Korea, Iran, Russia and Afghanistan, but ended up focusing mainly on advocating for Israel. It waited, however, until 2019 to be properly registered as a lobby. It is coy about the sources of its funding, but interestingly one source claims its funder is the UAE, through a reported \$2.5 million gift granted in 2017.⁵⁵

The plethora of such outfits led to various attempts to create an umbrella organisation. One such endeavour was the Israel on Campus Coalition, founded in 2002 by Schusterman Family Foundation together with the veteran Jewish societies on American campuses. What this co-ordination effort intended to achieve was joint action against BDS and pro-Palestinian activism in colleges across America. They came to light when their mother organisation, Hillel House, was challenged by an internal group called Open Hillel, which was critical of Israel and open to dialogue with campus Palestinian societies, at least temporarily.⁵⁶ ‘The enemy from within’ was now the main target for monitoring. This went far enough to

worry even the Jewish newspaper *Forward*, which wrote that they had built a ‘sophisticated political intelligence operation on US campuses’.⁵⁷

The internet is now a critical battlefield. Leading the way is the website Canary Mission, established in 2014, and several others like Campus Monitor are spearheading the lobby’s campaigns in that domain. Canary Mission works like a secret service organisation, compiling files on student activists in universities, threatening to send their names to prospective employers. The Israeli government uses these lists to prevent pro-BDS American citizens from entering Israel. No one has sued Canary Mission for illegal activity, but it was severely criticised, not only by pro-Palestinian organisations but also by pro-Israel ones, as a racist project.⁵⁸ Jewish academics in Europe and in America have compared Canary Mission’s activities to those employed by authoritarian regimes and during McCarthyism in the USA.⁵⁹

The last outfit we should mention with regard to suppressing pro-Palestine activism is the Israel Project. It was founded by Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi and friends of hers in 2003. Mizrahi also served as the president of the project until 2012. It was somewhat unique, as at first it targeted global cyberspace and tried to cater for the Arab world as well. It used to have an extensive Arabic media section but that was dropped in 2014 (this tried to operate independently as a different organisation called Al-Masdar (‘the source’) but that also closed, in 2019). In many ways both ambitions, of being global and serving the Arab world, were dropped by the time Al Jazeera looked into this particular NGO. By 2019, it had disappeared to all intents and purposes, due to funding problems. But while it existed, it had offices in Israel and the USA, its own publication called *The Tower*, and a student programme, and organised rather unique helicopter trips in Israel – the sheer cost of these possibly contributed to its downfall.

All these activities are comprehensively exposed in the Al Jazeera documentary *The Lobby – USA*.

Al Jazeera’s undercover investigation revealed further evidence of surveillance and smear campaigns conducted by the Israel on Campus Coalition. An executive of this body outlined for the undercover journalist

the organisation's intelligence-gathering and surveillance capabilities which the organisation claimed were directed towards pro-Palestine and BDS advocates. Other executives describe the organisation's surveillance efforts as a method of 'psychological warfare'. The film ultimately reveals that Israel on Campus Coalition co-ordinated closely with Canary Mission and the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs.

These revelations could have shocked and appalled the American public. Unsurprisingly, the lobby, led by AIPAC, did all it could to stop its screening in the US. The network announced its intention to broadcast the programme in October 2017. Jewish American organisations began pressuring the Qatari government, which is responsible for funding Al Jazeera, and were able to obtain a promise that the instalment on the US would not be screened by the network in February 2018.

Clayton Swisher, the director of the outlet's investigative journalism wing, accused the network of capitulation to outside pressure and justified his use of undercover investigators as:

used by many international broadcasters, including BBC and CNN, and is carefully managed, through multiple layers of legal and editorial review, to ensure it is performed consistently with local laws, industry regulations, and our own Code of Ethics.

Swisher suspended himself from working with the network as an act of protest against its decision on this issue.⁶⁰

As typical of the lobby, on the one hand it prided itself on its ability to exert pressure on the Qatari government, while on the other hand, it demonstrated its total lack of gratitude by trying to undermine Al Jazeera's presence in the USA. In March 2018, a bipartisan group of US lawmakers, including Democratic Congressman Josh Gottheimer, Republican Congressman Lee Zeldin and Senator Ted Cruz, urged attorney general Jeff Sessions to investigate whether Al Jazeera should register as a foreign agent, further alleging that the network had infiltrated non-profit organisations, as well as accusing it of broadcasting anti-Semitic, anti-Israeli and anti-American content.⁶¹

But by then civil society had its own way of coping with such pressure and censorship. In late August and early September 2018, leaked portions of the documentary series were aired by several outlets including the *Electronic Intifada* (an act condemned by Al Jazeera).

To sum up, all these fronts and all these campaigns were doomed to fail as brutal Israeli actions continued on the ground, fully exposed to the world by brave journalists such as Shireen Abu Akleh, who was murdered by Israeli soldiers in May 2022, and by alternative media outlets and human rights organisations, especially those active in Palestine itself. So AIPAC failed to hold back the tidal wave of pro-Palestinian activism in civil society. It continues to promote legislation against BDS on a federal basis, or in specific states, but this tactic – which worked for a while, but not everywhere – often hardened the attitudes of pro-Palestinian activists.

Looking at AIPAC's website in 2023 and following its main activities since November 2022, when an extreme right-wing coalition won the Israeli national elections, one gets the impression that it still believes that what matters are politics from above and not from below. Its main project is now called AIPAC-PAC (Public Affairs Committee), which focuses on recruiting funds for pro-Israel candidates on Capitol Hill. It boasts of having 365 politicians on both sides of the aisle on its roster, and it has spent more than \$17 million on them. Most of them, it claims, were elected in 2022. But the new government was not welcomed by the Biden administration, and time will tell how significant this will be for the overall ability of the lobby to influence American policy. As this book is being written, the American-Israeli relationship is at an unprecedented nadir because of what President Biden called the most extreme government Israel has had since he became a politician, back in the late 1960s. However, this book is not about predictions, but about detecting trends and structures. And this parallel movement of losing the sympathy of the public on the one hand, while still having clout with the political elite on the other, is not going to change any time soon. A similar parallel trajectory can be seen in Britain in the twenty-first century.